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Introduction

The inclusion of Aphra Behn in Anthony Collins' 1713 *Discourse of Free-Thinking* as the only female in a list of respected libertine thinkers calls into question traditional readings of Behn as solely a sexual libertine. While she certainly engages in controversial sexual and gendered philosophy, Collins considers her a part of a more broadly defined freethinking community of theological and classical inquiry. When Collins lists Behn in a sampling of writers that celebrated Thomas Creech's 1683 translation of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, she joins the ranks of men such as Dr. Edward Bernard, Joshua Barnes, and the provost of King's College, Dr. Adams (Collins 92). All of these men produced texts of interest for the freethinking community of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, from Bernard's discussions of suicide in Donne's *Biathanatos* to Barnes' fictional utopian world of pygmies. Yet Collins does not know that Behn was unusually controversial in her treatment of Creech's Lucretius. Her own commendatory poem underwent two editions, one of which was highly edited by Creech. Creech's edits reveal that he was concerned with her celebration of the freedom of thought—a freedom that even Behn seems to recognize could lead to complex and even problematic theological inquiries.

Collins draws the reader to recognize Behn as a philosopher of esteem. While the other men in this passage are simply listed, Behn is singled out with a longer introduction. Collins' choice to include and favorably memorialize Behn appears deliberately shocking but not satirical, as some may assume. In this deeply critical text which urges its readers to seriously question religious doctrines, Collins chooses to refer to Behn as "the Right Modest and Orthodox Matron" (Collins 92). With this

recommendation, Collins reinforces the urgency of re-examining our assumptions about the kind of libertine that Behn in fact was. He encourages the reader to consider her not just as a sexual libertine or a bawdy playwright, but rather as a respectable member of philosophical libertine circles of the seventeenth century. To invite her into such a community would be to overtly label her a freethinker. As I will examine throughout this essay, freethinking communities were predicated not on similar strains of thought, but rather on the discursive community that challenged dogma and entered debate. The poem for which Collins' recognizes her demonstrates Behn's desire to develop such a community.

Behn's inclusion in this list is not to be confined to just her treatment of Lucretius and Creech. In at least three other literary works, she exercises her commitment to intellectual freedom and collaboration. In *Oroonoko*, she develops a black enslaved protagonist who serves as a mouthpiece for identifying white Christian hypocrisy and supporting Epicurean ideals. In her "Essay on Translated Prose", Behn invokes theories of Biblical accommodation and translation in order to defend scientific discoveries that challenged theological principles, such as Copernican systems of the universe. Finally, in her poem, "A Letter to Mr. Creech", Behn voices her frustrations that, in spite of her publication of varied and astute libertine texts, she was, ultimately, excluded from the community of freethinkers because of her gender.

In developing sense of Behn as a libertine thinker from these sources, one comes across three central issues. Firstly, in spite of Behn's rather liberal philosophical discussions, her style of freethought is also closely connected with the politically conservative. This conservatism is particularly apparent in Behn's pro-monarchal

poetry and plays. Reconciling how the libertine can also function as a political conservative, as in writers such as Behn, Margaret Cavendish, and Thomas Hobbes, is imperative to our understanding of Behn as a complex and diverse thinker. In addition, though this reading of Behn calls into question essentialist views of her as just as sexual freethinker, it is impossible to ignore that, at some level, her libertinism was involved in the sexual. The inclusion of the sexual in freethought often existed on a slippery spectrum—from the highly desexualized Creech to the Earl of Rochester, who was known for writing pornographic poems that exposed hypocrisies in English society. That Behn is associated with both of these thinkers and writes rather freely about sex in her poems and plays forces us to consider the sexual nature of many of her writings; however, it is a disservice to allow the sexual aspect of her work to be prioritized over her religious, political, and social concerns. Lastly, it is tempting to assume that because she wrote so openly about urgent contemporary philosophical issues, she was fully included in the conversation. In reality, she was often overtly excluded. While this essay attempts to read her in spite of her gender, one cannot suggest that Behn's contemporaries did the same.

Before we understand what kind of libertine Behn asserted herself to be, it is crucial to outline what kind of freethought Collins accredits to her. In *A Discourse of Freethinking*, Collins provides intellectual historical overviews of the “The Rise and Growth of a Sect call'd Free-Thinkers” (Collins i). This overview includes Collins' definition of freethinking, a summary of challenges these communities have faced, and a list of libertines whom he admires. In this overview, it is clear that Collins' brand of freethinking is concerned not with the sexual, but rather the theological. The challenges

to which Collins refers are frequently in relation to quarrels with the Church of England.

An example of such is his detailed demonstration of “the Diversity of Opinions of the Priests of the Church of England, all pretended to be deduc’d from the Scripture” (61).

This section comprises, among other things, Collins’ denunciation of Trinitarianism and a discussion the diverse reception of Lucretian-Epicurean thought in the English church.

This is the passage in which Behn is commended not only for her morality, but also for her contribution, in her poem to Creech, to the ongoing discussion between the Church and seventeenth-century Epicureans.

Though Collins’ disillusionment with the sanctity of priestly decrees may reveal a sincere level of antagonism toward Christianity, he is not, by modern conceptions, atheistic or even agnostic. To suggest that he is such is to ignore sections in which he argues, through Scriptural evidence, for divinely condoned freethinking. Collins bases much of his treatise on the premise that “the general Rules of *Free-Thinking*, on which the *Gospel* was to be built,...[Jesus] so particularly laid down and inculcated” (Collins 46). Freethinking, while it may lead to doubt, not only has a Gospel precedent, but, as a Scriptural doctrine under Collins’ view, is also the duty of the Christian to practice.

According to *A Discourse of Free-thinking*, if the Christians’ goal is to arrive at divinely inspired knowledge, free inquiry can only be accessed by the heavenly gift of human reasoning. As such, practices of God-breathed rationality cannot be restricted by man-made religious doctrine. Under this framework, Collins writes:

If the surest and best means of arriving at Truth lies in *Free-Thinking*, then the whole Duty of Man with respect to Opinions lies only in *Free-Thinking*. Because he who *thinks freely* does his best towards being in the right, and consequently

does all that God, who can require nothing more of any Man than that he should do his best, can require of him. (33)

This notion of freethinking—permission to question established theological and natural philosophical principles from Scriptural evidence—allows for Collins to endorse such theories as the Copernican system of the universe and pre-Adamites.¹ Collins calls those who refuse to recognize the value of such theories “unthinkers” (5). “Unthinkers”, according to Collins, are those who wish to restrain public intellectual discourse. Indeed, Collins’ definition of free-thinking is clearly expressed at the beginning of the treatise: “Free-thinking...[is] the Use of the Understanding, in endeavouring to find out the Meaning of any Proposition whatsoever, in considering the nature of the Evidence for or against it, and in judging of it according to the seeming Force or Weakness of the Evidence” (5). This definition, Collins argues, cannot be deemed theologically unacceptable, though it is practiced by few because of religious restrictions.

For Collins to detail the rise of evidence-based intellectual explorations and institute Behn among early freethinkers elicits a reading of her that has been largely ignored. Surely, Behn has been studied as a libertine in regards to racial politics in *Oroonoko* and in regards to sexuality and gendered identity in her explicit, but politically centered, plays and prose works, such *The Rover* and her serial novel, *Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*. However, such readings, while accurate to some degree, reduce Behn to extremes of bawdy playwright or radical sexual thinker. These critical lenses

¹ Those who supported the notion of pre-Adamites argued that Adam was not the first man created, but instead, the first man to be recorded by the writer of the Book of Genesis.

have isolated her work from her active contribution to seventeenth-century intellectual libertinism.

More often than not, such criticism draws her as exclusively a proto-feminist or sexual libertine.² As contemporary critic Susan Wiseman deduces, Behn's "reputation for sexual freedom—or certainly for writing with freedom about sexual issues...led to a decline in her reputation during the eighteenth century" (Wiseman 5).³ This stereotype of Behn has ghettoized her and other Restoration women writers, such as Cavendish, in a way that rarely allows for dynamic dialogue with their intellectually driven male colleagues. Part of the problem with Behn's reception is that even the immediate, early eighteenth-century criticism of her reinforces this image of a woman of loose sexual morals who, as such, could not have meaningfully contributed to intellectual debates.

For example, Behn's philosophy is reduced to tropes of licentiousness in Alexander Pope's (1688-1744) collection of *Literary Correspondences*. In a letter from

² For example, one of the few books to consider Behn's potential Epicureanism or Lucretian ideologies is Laura Linkler's book *Dangerous Women: Libertines, Epicures, and the Rise of Sensibility* (2011). With her astute and detailed examination of Behn's *The Luckey Chance*, Linkler asserts, "Behn likely admired Lucretius for his attack on the hypocrisy of religion, with its superstitions, harmful practices, and teachings against free love" (51). However, this reading of Behn reinforces the concept of her as a sexual libertine rather than philosophical inquirer. In fact, there is little evidence to suggest that Behn's embracement of free-love extended beyond her writings. Moreover, Lucretius does not praise sexuality or sexual intercourse, but rather sees it as a lowly thing that humans must do—like scratching an itch. Thus, if Behn is the radical sexual thinker that such a reading purports and a close reader of Lucretius, these would not be the elements of the ancient philosopher that would attract her.

³ Wiseman and Janet Todd also make the crucial observation that Behn was at all times concerned with the profitability of her plays and poems. Thus, much of the sexual libertine elements in her plays are associated with her need to sell what was in vogue on the Restoration stage. Simply, sex was in high demand for a Restoration audience that sought to rebel against the recently overturned Puritan ban on theatre. Behn as a businesswoman was aware of the audience's desire for staged scandal and that such a play would sell.

“Mrs Thomas to Mr Curll”, Thomas notes, “I own I was pleased with the Cadence of her Verse, tho' at the same Time I in no ways approved the Licentiousness of her Morals” (Thomas 20). Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749) even pokes fun at her notoriety for the sexual. In his description of an “Irish Gentleman” who comes to “*Bath* to try his Luck with Cards and the Women”, Fielding presents this satirical caricature by directly associating the reading of Behn with the man’s loose sexual morals: “This young Fellow lay in Bed reading one of Mrs. *Behn's* Novels; for he had been instructed by a Friend, that he would find no more effectual Method of recommending himself to the Ladies than the improving his Understanding, and filling his Mind with good Literature” (Fielding 235). In a book that consistently satirizes, it is hard to ignore the biting humor that Fielding wields against Behn. Fielding’s caricature of both Behn’s writing and the Irish gentlemen reduce her audience to the debauched and the content of her long-form fiction to sexual, rather than intellectual, stimulation.

Perhaps, however, the most graphic sexual representation of Behn in the eighteenth century is in George Colman’s *The Connoisseur* (1754). Throughout this book, Colman presents fictionalized visions of writers from the sixteenth and seventeenth century. In these fantastical sketches, he presents an image of Behn on a horse:

A BOLD masculine figure now pushed forward in a thin, airy, gay habit, which hung so loose about her, that she appeared to be half undrest. When she came up to *Pegasus*, she clapped her hand upon the side-saddle, and with a spring leaped across it, saying that she would never ride him but astride.... She shewed her legs at every motion of the horse, and many of the *Muses* turned their heads aside

blushing. *Thalia*⁴, indeed, was a good deal pleased with her frolicks.... Upon enquiring her name, I found her to be the free-spirited Mrs. BEHN. When she was to dismount, Lord *Rochester* came up, and caught her in his arms.... (Colman 413)

Indeed, Behn's mounting of the horse is symbolic of the sexual licentiousness with which she was associated. In spite of the image Colman puts forth, Behn, in her personal life, was not known for lasciviousness or "loose" dress. Perhaps, her connection to Rochester prompted Behn's frequent association with a sort of sexual libertinism. After all, Rochester's reputation for writing pornographic satirical poetry made him a contentious figure in Restoration society and a problematic friendship for Behn to cultivate so intensely.

Much like George Colman in *The Connoisseur*, eighteenth-century theatre historian Charles Dibdin would point to Rochester as a sign of a lack of propriety on Behn's part. Her praise of Rochester's principles would be listed as one of her many "animadversions" in his 1797 *A Complete History of the English Stage* (Dibdin 199). His main complaint stems from her plays, which he characterizes as so crude that "small taste of [her plays] will be quite strong enough for a delicate stomach"; however, it is clear that another source of his criticism comes from her controversial, libertine philosophical arguments (199).⁵ His disdainful reading of Behn is inspired by her friendship with

⁴ *Thalia* is the muse of good cheer in Greek mythology. Though Behn's poetry, translations, and prose writings were often serious, she is most often considered for her comedic playwriting. Of all the theatrical works attributed to her, only one of which is considered a true tragedy, that being *Abdelazer, or the Moor's Revenge* (1676).

⁵ Dibdin also provides some context for Behn's reputation in the eighteenth century, suggesting that she was somewhat of a controversial but well-liked author among virulent female readers. He concedes that her "notes, animadversions, and vignettes, [are] handed

Rochester, her narrator's close connection to the black protagonist in her novella *Oroonoko*, and, crucially, his own view of her as "another JUDITH in patriotism" (Dibdin 199). Judith is a rather controversial figure in Jewish history. Her story involves her assassination of Holofernes, the violent general of King Nebuchadnezzar's army. The image of Holofernes' decapitated head in Judith's hand frequently manifests itself in seventeenth-century art.⁶ Given Dibdin's rather spiteful take on Behn, it is hard to believe that he calls Behn a "Judith" as a form of praise. Dibdin views Behn's public "amoral" writings, lack of British fervor (she seemed to have found the French just as compelling), and disregard for the Church of England as a sort of "beheading" of British nationalism. Regardless of Dibdin's criticism of Behn, this image suggests that he indeed saw her as politically active and influential (whether positively or not) in the seventeenth-century intellectual network.

In spite of these eighteenth-century discussions of Behn as sexually and intellectually controversial, Behn is most frequently referenced in early discussions of other seventeenth-century female writers. Eighteenth-century literary critics tend to contrast Behn with the famous female poet and playwright—Katherine Philips, who was frequently called by her pseudonym, Orinda. If Behn found praise, it was normally in subordination to the woman often referred to as the "Matchless Orinda". More often than not, however, eighteenth-century critics note Behn as the amoral counterpart to Orinda's

to all the young ladies in the kingdom who are subscribers to the circulating libraries" (Dibdin 199).

⁶ One of the more famous interpretations of Judith is Caravaggio's 1602 painting "Judith Beheading Holofernes". In this painting, Caravaggio captures Judith in the middle of the decapitation. Her face looks concerned yet confident in her action. Variants in such portraiture spans from Judith as fearful of her action to rather savage in her murder.

stateliness. John Duncombe, in his poem “The Femininead” (1751), celebrates female writers from the past centuries that he considers of great merit. In this poem, he

Brings up Orinda as supreme

The modest muse a veil with pity throws

O'er vice's friends, and virtue's female foes;

Abash'd she views the bold unblushing mien

Of modern Manley, Centlivre, and Behn. (Duncombe 191-192)

Crucially, Duncombe places Behn in conjunction with Susanna Centlivre, who was considered the most successful female playwright of the eighteenth century, with Behn as the most successful of the seventeenth. In the eyes of Duncombe, Orinda is a predecessor of an ethereal sort—one whom Behn and Centlivre should strive to be but are too amoral to achieve.

Behn, Lucretius, and Creech—Editions and Contradictions

Creech's Translation of *De Rerum Natura*

By the time Thomas Creech translated *De Rerum Natura* into the first complete and published English version of Lucretius' epic poem in 1682, the fifteenth-century rediscovery of Lucretius the philosopher (c. 99 BCE-c. 55 BCE) had already taken hold of much of the Western Renaissance. Creech was not introducing English society to Lucretius but, instead, providing access to the poem for members of the English intellectual community that did not read Latin. Notably, Aphra Behn falls into this category. Her poem, “To the Unknown Daphnis on His Excellent Translation of

Lucretius”, was a part of a collection of commendatory poems placed at the beginning of Creech’s published translation.

Many of these poems celebrate Creech’s translation as a means of increasing the English audience’s accessibility to Lucretius. However, Creech was not the first to undergo the process of translation for an English audience. He was preceded by Lucy Hutchinson in the 1650s. Her work with *De Rerum Natura* was largely unheard of by the time Creech published his volumes. Despite Hutchinson’s translation’s lack of publicity, women writers’ engagement with Lucretius was at the forefront of mid- to late-seventeenth century British reception of Epicureanism. Women such as Cavendish and Behn supported Lucretian theories of atomism and religious skepticism, while Hutchinson sought to translate Lucretius, in part, to more accurately argue against his anti-providential teachings. Regardless of their position, women public intellectuals were compelled to enter the Lucretian conversation. Given his master Epicurus’ reported inclusion of women in his infamous garden, this connection is particularly fitting.

Women’s actual invitation to the Garden remains under speculation. For instance, intellectual historian Pamela Gordon argues that Epicurus’ inclusivity towards women and slaves was exaggerated by his contemporaries to destabilize his reputation in philosophical society. Regardless of whether women and slaves were literally a part of the Garden or not, the recognition of the Garden as female-inclusive was prevalent. As Gordon writes, “To generations of Greeks and Romans, the presence of women and slaves in the garden was emblematic—for good or for ill—of the nature of Epicureanism” (Gordon 265).

Critics of women in the Garden were primarily critical of perceived Epicurean hedonism—or rather the common misconception that Epicureans were hedonistic pursuers of morally debased impulses. The prominent Epicurean doctrine of pleasure was often misconstrued to say that, for Epicureans, pleasure was rife with lust, alcohol, and gluttony. In reality, the Epicurean culture (which continued with Lucretius) was rather condemnatory towards sexual desire and excessive consumption of food or drink. Pleasure for the Epicurean is balance, tranquility, and conversation, and the Garden provides a location for this. Epicureans believe that true pleasure comes from health of mind and body without the fear of divine retribution in the afterlife. If death is nothingness and thus absent of a “great judgment”, then one lives for the present. In this system of thought, the Garden is a retreat from the religious and political divisions of non-Epicurean society. In a country reeling from the aftermath of a Civil War and constant religious discord, such an idea of retreat was enticing. That Lucretius writes his Epicurean philosophies in the face of a Roman Civil War makes *De Rerum Natura* all the more applicable and compelling for a Restoration reader.

Many who were fascinated by Lucretius and Epicurus were indeed loyalists who had faced exile in the face of Civil War. Lucretius and his theory of atomism, chaos, and a lack of afterlife resonated deeply with a Restoration audience all too familiar with the perils of war. Thus, emerging translations of Lucretius were disseminated not just for his controversial thoughts, but for his philosophy in regards to how one maintains an interior serenity in the face of chaos. Lucretian and Epicurean pleasure is not based on hedonism then, but a search for the tranquil, the balance of a moment, the health of the body in the face of strife. As Lucretius writes in *De Rerum Natura*:

Yet were man to steer
 His life by sounder reasoning, he'd own
 Abounding riches, if with mind content
 He lived by thrift; for never, as I guess,
 Is there a lack of little in the world. (Lucretius V. 1119-1123)

Combined with this political and religious background, the Epicurean school's precedent for including women only intensified this connection among Restoration women writers specifically.⁷

Despite early modern fascination with Epicurean and Lucretian ideas, this philosophy was not necessarily well-received. As Howard Jones details, "[D]uring the early years of the seventeenth century in England the atomist cause suffered not so much from lack of attention as from attention which for a variety of reasons had a negative rather than positive impact" (Jones 194). In spite of these conflicting viewpoints, during the 1650s, when Hutchinson began work on her own translation, Epicurean atomism became increasingly and seriously discussed in British intellectual circles. This atomism was famously championed by Walter Charleton (1619-1707). In 1652, he published one of the first largely accepted books in support of Epicureanism, in which he provides serious consideration of atomist principles. Because of his reputation, Charleton's promotion was crucial to the growing acceptance of Epicurean and Lucretian thought. Charleton, like Creech, specifically sought to reconcile seemingly agnostic Lucretian

⁷ Of course, unlike Behn and Cavendish, Lucy Hutchinson was a Puritan who was devout to her family's anti-monarchal politics. Her husband was deeply involved in the Parliamentary cause of the Civil War just prior. Though she, too, could see the wake of divisiveness and relate to such themes in a similar way to Cavendish and Behn.

ideals with Christian standards of thought in British society. To him, atomist theories of order and chaos suggest not the absence of an active and caring creator, but rather the immensity of the power and intellect in God.

Charleton was not alone in his defense of extracting Biblically sound elements from controversial texts. He particularly supported of a reading of *De Rerum Natura* that allowed him to revere atomist theories while ignoring Lucretius' larger themes of chaos, atheism, and the lack of an afterlife. He had as a model Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), a famous French libertine thinker and promoter of Epicurean thought. As Lynn Sumida Joy writes, Gassendi was of a dangerous strain of philosophy, as "he fully articulated an atomist metaphysics and physics during a period when these activities were subject to accusations of atheism, libertinism, and the harboring of unorthodox beliefs" (4). Gassendi continued to have a great impact on English apologetics for Lucretian and Epicurean study. Thus, the idea of selective readings of *De Rerum Natura* would become crucial to English acceptance of the poem, especially in Creech's own annotations of his translation.

Creech's *On the Nature of Things* is an inherently self-conscious work. He prefaces the poem with his purpose for translating: "I have heard that the best Method to overthrow the Epicurean Hypothesis (I mean as it stands opposite to Religion) is to expose a full system of it to the publick view: For Atheism usually enters at the Will, and That debauch't makes the Understanding as blind as it self" (Creech ix). Much as Hutchinson argues in her prefatory material, one reason to translate these classical poets is to better refute the strain of thought that stood to challenge the fabric of orthodoxy in the English church. Creech expresses anxiety at the growing preoccupation with and

celebration of Lucretius. He is especially disconcerted by “admirers of Mr. Hobbes” whose “Politicks are but Lucretius enlarged; his state of Nature is sung by our Poet” (Creech x).

Considered by Collins an important libertine thinker of the seventeenth century, Hobbes dismisses trinitarian beliefs and was thought to have argued for an atomist strain of thought, all while promoting a conservative monarchal civilian structure. Creech’s denunciation of this widely read author serves as a statement against the rising tide of Lucretian thought in the 1650s. Throughout his text, Creech performs a rhetorical balancing act between the content he is translating and his own personal beliefs, largely through his elaborate footnotes. In the small, unassuming first edition of Book One, almost half of the text is not Lucretius’ poem, but poems excusing its existence and Creech’s interjecting statements against Lucretius’ unsavory heterodoxy in the marginalia. In one particular note in Book One, Creech argues against Lucretius’ label as an atheist:

But since Antiquity hath but Three Atheists on record, why should we increase the Catalogue? He therefore asserts Divine Nature, and proves it from the common consent of Mankind... therefore, Lucretius makes the Case of this general Consent to be the constant deflux of Divine Images, which strike the Mind. (2)

Indeed, charges of atheism were rampant in early modern reception of Lucretius; however, it is clear that Creech sought to distance his subject from such accusations to in turn deflect any potential charges against him as a translator. Regardless of whether Creech agreed with his note, he was ever cognizant of the implications of the Roman

poet. For this reason, Creech edits Behn's commendatory poem of him with a great deal of anxiety.

Behn's "To the Unknown Daphnis on His Excellent Translation of Lucretius"

The first version of Behn's "To the Unknown Daphnis on His Excellent Translation of Lucretius" was originally published in the prefatory poems to Thomas Creech's Lucretius translation, *On the Nature of Things*, in 1682. However, Behn published an alternative version of the poem in her 1684 collection, *Poems Upon Several Occasions*.⁸ In comparing the 1682 and 1684 editions, it becomes clear that Creech edited the poem that appeared in his book to appear much less controversial than Behn intended. Both versions of "To the Unknown Daphnis" are an outlet for Behn to issue complaints against societal restrictions that kept her and other women from being able to learn Latin. Behn celebrates Creech's work for providing access to these women as a counteraction to this injustice. However, in Behn's version of the poem, something bolder is going on than this self-effacement. "To the Unknown Daphnis" also provides Behn with an opportunity to state her own respect and appreciation of the Roman philosopher, as well as prove her connections to other libertine philosophers of English intellectual society. She is particularly interested in the intellectual discussion coming from alumnae of Wadham College. This collective includes Creech, Thomas Sprat, and John Wilmot Earl of Rochester. Though Behn suggests these men are carrying on a tradition of intellectual libertinism, Behn does not claim that they are of the same mind within libertine thought.

⁸ The variants described throughout this section come from the list provided in the anthologized edition of this poem in Janet Todd's *The Works of Aphra Behn, Volume 1: Poetry*. The poem published in full is that of Creech's poem. The variants provided are the changes that appeared after Behn published her intended poem in her book, *Poems Upon Several Occasions*.

Rather, she mentions them together to illustrate the ongoing conversations among freethinkers about the benefits and problems with contentious philosophies, such as Epicureanism.

Given the boldness with which Behn implicates Creech in freethought, criticizes gender inequalities, and celebrates Lucretian philosophy, Creech, to his credit, leaves much of the poem intact. In fact, upon a superficial reading, Creech's edits are relatively minor. Many of the lines have only a word or two replaced with another, an omitted phrase here or there, and some grammatical preferences. However, the cumulative effect of such adaptations accomplishes Creech's two obvious objectives: a stronger reassertion of Behn's status as female and an elimination of most all elements that could be viewed as religiously offensive or critical of religious institutions.

Perhaps the most covert edits that Creech makes concern Behn's comments on gender inequalities. Throughout, Behn's poem demonstrates a keen awareness of the complicated relationship between a female intellectual and a great Roman poet. She is even more cognizant about how this relationship is complicated by her lack of educational access. She acknowledges, from the outset, her lack of admission into the classical canon. She writes in her poem that "the scant'd Customs of the Nation, / Permitt[ed] not the Female Sex to tread / The Mighty Paths of Learned *Heroes* Dead" ("Unknown Daphnis" 26-28).

Initially, such educational limitations appear to influence her hesitant tone. In an uncharacteristic turn for the writer, Behn briefly appears intimidated by the content of which she writes. In her self-published edition, Behn states,

But I of feebler Seeds design'd,

While the slow moveing Atoms strove
 With Careless Heed to Form my Mind,
 Compos'd it all of softer Love. (7-10)⁹

Behn, who famously called her poetry her “masculine part”, concedes in her self-published edition that “What in Strong Manly Verse I would express / Turns all to Womanish Tenderness within” (12-13). However, Behn, throughout the rest of this poem, readjusts the way the reader views this inferiority. Behn’s gender-based self-deprecation is centered not on biological traits but on the social constraints that limited her engagement with classical sources. She goes on later to write in her edition of the poem that through Creech’s translation, he “dost advance / Our Knowledge from the State of Ignorance; / Equals us to man!” (41-43).¹⁰ While Creech retains Behn’s critique of gender education gaps, his edits reinforce the prevailing image of Behn as subordinate female reader in ways that Behn’s does not.

For instance, while Behn writes “What in Strong Manly Verse I would express”, which suggests a natural predilection to writing at the level of her masculine counterparts, Creech eliminates such an assertion by changing the line to read: “What in Strong Manly Verse should be exprest” (“Unknown Daphnis” 13). Through this alteration, Creech removes her agency and capability and instead labels of the kind of poetry and reading to be preferred—a kind that Behn cannot produce as a woman. Creech again employs subtle edits to reinforce Behn’s otherness as a female writer. Behn, invoking the classical Muse

⁹ Creech’s edition leaves this section of the poem largely untouched, only substituting “Whilst” for “While” in line 8.

¹⁰ Creech’s edition makes a grammatical change to this passage so that the last two lines cited read: “Our Knowledge from the State of Ignorance / And Equallst Us to Man!”.

at the beginning of her poem, calls to her “humbler Muse to bring its Tribute too”, whereas Creech’s version changes her genderless possessive pronoun “its” to a feminine “her” (3). While Behn eliminates the classical pairing of female muse and male writer, Creech underlines this traditional relationship and undercuts any potential commentary Behn could make with her pronoun choices.¹¹

Similarly, Behn later says that before Creech’s translation, “I curst my Birth, my Education” (25). Creech changes this to “I curst my Sex and Education” (25). Though Behn classifies her class and education as two different circumstances that limit her access to the classics of men, Creech does not allow education and sex to merge under the same umbrella as she does. In doing so, he effectively diminishes Behn’s social commentary and breakdown of literary gender roles.

Just as Creech’s subtle syntactical edits reintroduce gender normativity into Behn’s poem, so do his concerted changes to diction emphasize the secularity of Lucretian thought. Though Creech publishes Behn’s exclamation “Worthy Divine Lucretius and Diviner You!”, he eliminates much of the language that would make his scholarly enterprise have anything to do with religion (6). Behn frequently calls *De Rerum Natura* and the translational aptitude of Creech “divine” or “sacred”. In the final stanza, Behn deems Creech’s writing “sacred” twice. She encourages him, “Advance Young Daphnis then, and mayst thou prove / Still sacred in thy Poetry and Love” (126-

¹¹ Creech does seem particularly preoccupied with Behn and her notion of muses. Later in the text, Behn complains, “The Godlike Virgil and Great Homers Verse / Like Divine Mysteries are conceal’d from us” (29-30). Creech changes “Verse” to “Muse” in his version, a curious change that is difficult to decipher. Perhaps, Creech sought to dissuade Behn from suggesting that through his translation Behn and other female writers would be allowed to have a “muse” of their own. In these instances, Creech appears hesitant to align himself with the female liberation narrative Behn imposes on his text.

127). In response, Creech carefully substitutes “happy” for “sacred” (127). Moreover, at the conclusion of the poem Behn speaks for his readership, “We are content to know, and to admire thee in thy Sacred Verse”, from which Creech omits “Sacred” (142).

Even more concerning for Creech is Behn’s rather blunt understanding of Lucretian ideology. Creech clearly fears that Behn’s effusive support of Lucretius characterizes his translation as an act in support of the ancient poet’s anti-providentialism. This anxiety is apparent in Creech’s footnotes. Creech’s work in the marginalia and prefatory material is almost entirely contradicted by Behn’s original poem. Where Creech seeks to distance his translational work from charges of atheism, Behn seeks more closely to align herself with Epicurean theology. In summation, Creech’s edits are an attempt to de-radicalize his work without compromising Behn’s high praise of him. While he seems pleased that Behn’s poem draws attention to increased reading access for the English population, he does not wish to have his translation read as an act of gender reform. While he identifies himself as a man of faith, he does not want his book to be read as a work of faith. In many ways, Behn’s admiration goes too far for Creech. She examines the societal implications of increased access to classical texts too closely; she reads Lucretius too favorably and too well.

Indeed, much of the 1684 version of the poem reads as a summary of all things controversial in *De Rerum Natura*—from atomism to anti-providentialism. Behn carefully balances her poem’s two central aims: praising Creech and proving herself a worthy Lucretian. She imbues her poem with the language of Lucretius in a way that allows her to keep her focus on Creech while still demonstrating her inherent understanding and celebration of Lucretian philosophy. Her statement that “the slow moveing Atoms strove

“/ With Careless Heed to Form my Mind” serves two functions (7-8). As stated before, this self-deprecation places Behn in a subordinate position in order for her to acclaim Creech as a follower of Epicurus, but it also serves as a palpable image of atoms (or thoughts of atomism) within her mind. Not only is she comfortable enough with the materialism of atomist philosophy to reference it in a light-hearted fashion, but she is able to bring atomism quite literally into the female mind through this corporeal imagery.

Though atomism in Behn’s day was more widely acknowledged and accepted, the Lucretian critique of religion as fraudulent and for the feeble-minded was considered blasphemous—a fact that concentrated much of the footnotes of Creech’s translation. While Creech shies away from associating his beliefs with Lucretius, Behn seems ebullient in her treatment of Lucretian disdain for organized religion and theories of afterlife. Such enthusiasm compelled Creech to alter much of the language in his published draft. After commending Creech for his effortless translated prose, Behn reacts to the philosophy of Lucretius, presented to her through Creech’s translation:

It Peirces, Conquers, and Compells

Beyond poor Feeble Faith’s dull Oracles

Faith the despairing Souls content

Faith Last Shift of Routed Argument. (55-58)

The language of these four lines aligns Behn with some of the most radical published thought of the seventeenth century. In this short space, Behn acclaims Lucretian philosophy as more potent than “dull” faith, while also connecting “faith” to the paganism of oracles. Furthermore, like Lucretius, Behn endorses the argument that faith is a means of intellectual comfort for the weak-minded in the face of humanity’s

existential questions. Behn is clear that she is not providing a synopsis of Lucretian philosophy but arguing for it herself. Though she must have been aware of controversy and radicalness of her acclamation, she does not cloak her opinions in convoluted language. Like Lucretius, she is unwavering in her assertion that faith is the salve for the “despairing Souls” and the trump card of a waning side of debate.

While Behn’s language in this passage is straightforward, Creech alters these lines’ meaning without changing their structure. Creech’s edition indicates a deep fear of the kind of thought Behn supported. Creech’s edit of these lines reads:

It Pierces, Conquers, and Compells

As strong as Faith’s resistless Oracles,

Faith the Religious Souls content,

Faith the secure Retreat of Routed Argument. (55-58)

Creech’s changes are obvious here, often replacing Behn’s diction with their antonyms. For instance, faith’s oracles in Behn’s text are “feeble” and “dull”, whereas Creech’s are “strong” and “resistless”. Where Behn’s view of souls searching for answers is “despairing”, Creech’s is “Religious”. Where, to Creech, arguments resting on theological principle are “secure”, to Behn, such arguments are the “Last Shift”. Creech’s disapproval of Behn’s radical denunciation of faith-based philosophy could not be clearer when comparing these variants.

Behn’s text does not rule out the possibility of a god but does draw a stark contrast between nature and religion. At the very least, Behn’s poem is a clear statement against religious imposition into natural epistemology. Behn denies the positive influence of religious dogma on poetic and intellectual development when she writes, “Poets by

Nature Aw, and Charm the Mind, / Are born, not made by dull Religion, or Necessity” (“To the Unknown” 75-76).¹² However, Behn’s development as a freethinker and poet is starkly different from the kind of progress described here. To Behn, her lack of education in divinity makes her path to intellectualism and poetics much more difficult. She complains that women are put at a disadvantage because “Divine Mysteries are conceal’d from them” (30). Thus, Behn presents two distinctly different interpretations of the value of religion in the development of the freethinker. While she denies a divine influence upon male poets, she is swift to blame the lack of accessibility to studies of the divine when it hinders her own education and literary success.¹³¹⁴

Still, Behn’s relationship to theism is complicated by her intense secularization of the term “sacred” and “divine”. These adjectives appear with startling frequency throughout the text, yet never in regards to an actual deity. Instead Behn invokes this religious diction to places and things. She writes of “Sacred Wadham [College]”, “Sacred...Friendship”, and “Courts...held as sacred Things” (59, 69, 79). In addition, people in “To the Unknown Daphnis” are written as religious figures. When praising

¹² In Creech’s version of this poem, he strikes “dull” before religion.

¹³ In a brief poem, Behn writes of her doubt in regards to religious affairs:

Doubt, ye worst Tyrant of a gen’rous Mind
The Coward’s ill, who dares not meet his Fate
And ever doubting to be fortunate
Falls to the Wretchedness, his Tears create. (“Doubt” 358)

While this poem has yet to be dated by scholars, it provides an alternative perspective on Behn’s grappling with institutionalized truths and her own engagement with a rather free-thinking group of intellectuals who promoted a more secular understanding of larger cosmic questions.

¹⁴ Throughout this essay, the term “cosmic truths” is in reference to the broader existential questions of the seventeenth-century (and even today). What are we? Who/what do we come from? What is our order in the universe? What is our purpose? These are the questions that generate answers I call “cosmic truths”, which create one’s view of “cosmic order”.

“Strephon the Great” (a pseudonym for John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester), Behn says he “writ, and Lov’d, and Lookt like any God” (90). She writes that the students of Wadham College were “Fanes of Sylvain Gods / [who] Were Worshipt as Divine Abodes” (67-68). Her incessant employment of the words “divine” and “sacred” could suggest a taunting treatment of religious institutions or even a mockery of Creech’s own insistence on “theologizing” Lucretius in the marginalia of his text. Creech certainly seems discontent with the repetition. He omits the word “sacred” three times in this poem alone.

While Behn frequently doubts religious authority in a highly Epicurean way, her traditionally pro-monarchal position found in her other work is challenged by Lucretius’ cynicism toward political authority. Behn, who wrote frequently for and to the crown, appears to contradict herself when she calls into question the divine right of the throne. She writes, “To Gods for fear Devotion was design’d, / And safety made us bow to Majesty” (“Unknown Daphnis” 76).¹⁵ Just as God, in Lucretius’ worldview, is created by man as a fearmongering tactic to keep society in check, so too is government. The separation of religion, divinity, and statehood places Behn outside traditional arguments for monarchal rule; however, her statement does not revert Behn’s status as a devout Tory. In fact, Behn’s view of the state in “To the Unknown Daphnis” is reminiscent of the pro-monarchal writings of Machiavelli or Hobbes. In these authors’ work, monarchs are not given rule by a god but by their own will or birth. In spite of the absence of divine

¹⁵ What remains unclear is why of all the portions of this text that Creech chose not to edit, he chose this. These two lines, perhaps some of the most daring of the entire poem, remain untouched in both editions. Perhaps the convoluted wording of the text provided Behn with a guise for what lies in the subtext; however, for such a thoughtful edit on Creech’s part, why this remains is hard to reconcile given the almost paranoid changes that appear throughout the rest of the poem.

right, Machiavelli and Hobbes both suggest that respected governmental structures are essential in maintaining societal homeostasis. This Behn's poem seems to argue for the same understanding of governmental authority. Though this passage places Behn in a minority of royalists, it actually reflects the complex conservative-progressive tension within Behn's political and religious freethought. As such, "To the Unknown Daphnis" also provides Behn an opportunity to reconcile her pro-institutional political beliefs with her anti-institutional religious tendencies.

This dichotomy reemerges when Behn campaigns for the "Learned Thirsis"—her pseudonym for Thomas Sprat (1635-1713). Sprat was a colleague of Thomas Creech's at Wadham College and the writer of several poems and books, most notably his poem on "The Plague of Athens" (1667). Behn commends Sprat for standing up to the "mad Senate-House"—her term for the Rump Parliament, which existed as the rather shaky governing body during the Interregnum. She equates his offensive against this political body to a dynamic support of Christian orthodoxy (88). In effusive verse, she envisions Sprat's activism:

That [which] Threatned to ruine to the Church and State,
 Unmoved He stood and fear'd no Threats of Fate,
 That Loyal Champion for the Church and Crown
 That Noble Ornament of the Sacred Gown¹⁶
 Still did his Sovereigns Cause espouse,
 And was above the Thanks of the mad Senate-House. (84-88)

¹⁶ The line "That Noble Ornament of the Sacred Gown" is omitted in Creech's version—one of the many instances in the variants in which it is suggestive that Creech grew tiresome of Behn's imposition of divine rhetoric upon the secular.

Though Behn appears to deny divine monarchical right, she calls Sprat's work against the Rump Parliament "Soveriegn" and proves him a defendant of the "Sacred Gown" (86-87). Her praise of Sprat's defense of religious control contradicts her earlier denunciation of religious impositions on freethought, but it also supports Hobbesian ideals of the relationship between church and state.

Indeed, Behn's "To the Unknown Daphnis" reads as a rather Hobbesian text. While Behn bemoans institutional religious control over intellectual production, she also frequently celebrates a monarchy that exerts its control, in part, through the Church of England. Thus, Behn grapples directly with the contradiction inherent between her political conservatism and religious libertinism within this poem. These contradictions are similar to those found in Hobbes' work. Hobbes supports the Church as a tool of monarchical control over larger society, but one gets the sense that Hobbes sees himself as outside or even above the larger populace. Perhaps, Behn is arguing the same exceptionalism for herself in the "To the Unknown Daphnis". Monarchical and religious control is needed for non-intellectuals, but intellectuals such as Behn, Hobbes, Creech, etc. should be excluded from such academic governance.

Behn's Praise of Wadham College

Wadham College was an Oxford University institution with a growing reputation for generating communities of freethought. The three alumnae to which Behn refers from Wadham College studied there over the course of several decades and also embraced multiplicity of philosophical positions. Thomas Sprat arrived in 1657 and remained with a fellowship there until 1670; the Earl of Rochester arrived in 1660 at the age of 12; and

Thomas Creech, lastly, came to Wadham in 1670 (Wells 77, 83, 97). Not only is Behn's construction of a "Wadham collective" complicated by the time frames in which they studied at the university but is further problematized by the divergence of their opinions within freethought. In an effort to construct an idealized pastoral community, Behn refers to Sprat and Rochester as educational forbearers to Creech. By doing this, Behn places Creech in a larger freethinking community, particularly that which came out of Wadham college in the 1660s-1670s.

In addition to Sprat, Creech, and Rochester, Wadham College was also notably the educational center for John Wilkins. In his treatises *The Discovery of a World in the Moone* and *A Discourse Concerning a New Planet*, Wilkins argues the moon may be inhabitable and that people would one day reach the moon. He also promoted a sort of natural theology that was prominent at the time, particularly at Wadham College. In his proposition that "The Moon may be a World", Wilkins writes, "That a plurality of worlds doth not contradict any principle of reason or faith" (Wilkins 28). His defense is supported by the lack of scientific authority of famous theologians like Saint John, Moses, and Thomas Aquinas who oppose this many-worlds proposition. For Wilkins and other Restoration freethinkers, natural theology attempts to reconcile religious principles with the emergent scientific discoveries of the past centuries. This trend was especially inspired by Sir Frances Bacon's book *Novum Organum* (1620) in which Bacon views the natural world as a book of God. As Wadham College historian, J. Wells, denotes, "So Bacon and his 'Novum Organon' were looked upon (even in his own day) as the starting-point of the new movement" (Wells 71). Both Wilkins and Bacon spoke for the existence of a divine whilst separating the study of nature from the study of Scripture.

This division of religious doctrine from empirical study would have certainly appealed to Behn. She interjects in “To the Unknown Daphnis”, “Hail Sacred Wadham!” and writes of Wadham as a sort of cradle for the great upcoming poets and thinkers:

They blest thy Fabrick, and said—do Thou

Our Darling Sons contain;

We Thee our Sacred Nursery ordain,

They said, and Blest, and it was so....

What Veneration should be paid

To Thee that hast such wondrous Poets made? (“Unknown Daphnis” 63-66, 71-72)

Though Wilkins is not mentioned in this praise, Behn’s earlier comments arguing for the separation of the religious and the scientific would have appealed to the doctrine of Wilkins who sought to reconcile Scriptural theology with natural philosophy. However, her references to Sprat and Rochester serve a perhaps more complex relationship than a nod to Wilkins would have.

Indeed, Behn does not only comment on Sprat’s political activism. She primarily regards him in connection to his poem “The Plague of Athens”. This plague is the same that Lucretius describes at the conclusion of *De Rerum Natura*. Both scholars wrote within the context of a civil war, and because of this, Lucretius and Sprat wrote of the plague as a parallel to the chaos of a state divided. Behn elucidates this theme in both works by calling the English Civil War “a greater Plague [that] reign[ed] / Than that which Athens did depopulate” (81-82). Behn is pointing to Sprat’s epic poem which vividly imagines the personalized horror of the Athenians in the face of the ravaging

plague. He, like Lucretius, views the plague as a sign of the absence of divine intervention. Sprat concludes his poem:

Vertue was now esteem'd an empty name,
And honesty the foolish voice of fame;
For having pass'd those tort'ring flames before,
They thought the punishment already o're,
Thought Heaven no worse torments had in store;
Here having felt one Hell, they thought there was no more. (Sprat XXI)

Behn certainly would have been cognizant of the similarities in approach to the plague, and it is clear that Sprat's impression of the Greek real-life tragedy was influenced by the Roman poet. Lucretius also writes of a collective atheism that arises from the devastation of a plague and the breakdown of human dignity in the face of horror:

For now no longer men
Did mightily esteem the old Divine,
The worship of the gods: the woe at hand
Did over-master. (Lucretius, Book VI, 1279-1282)

For Lucretius, the plague serves as a perfect example of the absence of a caring or an involved deity. Placed at the end of *De Rerum Natura*, the plague is the embodiment of the chaos and futility of man's religious devotion. For Sprat, this plague is perceived in a much more distressing way. Sprat seems to languish over the theological uncertainty that such an event elicits. Thus, Sprat's reimagining of the plague is not a contemporizing of Lucretius, but rather an alternative response to Athenian events, religious skepticism, and his own context within the English Civil War.

Unlike Sprat, there is much textual evidence and publication history that points to a close relationship between Rochester and Behn. He and Behn worked on many projects together. He edited her work frequently, and they often collaborated on projects together and commented poetically on each other's work. For instance, Behn's famous poem based on Ovidian impotence jokes, "The Disappointment", shares many similar themes with Rochester's "The Imperfect Enjoyment". Moreover, she would very publicly mourn his early death (he was only 33 at his passing) in her elegy "On the Death of the Late Earl of Rochester" (1680). In this poem, she laments his loss for the literary and intellectual community, mourning that "Satyr has lost its Art, its Sting is gone" and that the cupids of the world have now have darts that "Have lost their wonted power of piercing hearts" ("On the Death" 27, 53). Both of these lines are in reference to Rochester's penchant for writing vividly and often violently of the sexual, yet the visceral nature of his poetry served a larger purpose. Rochester exposed "Fop and Cully" in society through the poetically pornographic (28). A woman's praise of another man's infamous gallantry and overt sexuality was a dangerous undertaking, but one with which Behn would have been familiar in critiques of her own writings.

Behn also draws from Rochester's seemingly agnostic writings, particularly those that she sees as an extension of Epicureanism: "Large was his Fame, but short his Glorious Race, / Like a young Lucretius and dy'd apace" ("On the Death" 68-69). Interestingly, this comment directly contradicts her statement in "To the Unknown Daphnis" that Creech's translation allowed her to read and understand Lucretius for the first time. "On the Death of the Late Earl of Rochester" was published nearly two years before Creech's version of *De Rerum Natura*. These inconsistent accounts of readership

prove that, at the very least, Behn was comfortable with the general principles of Lucretian ideology long before Creech's translation was in the marketplace.

Indeed, it seems that Behn has a rather strong Epicurean-Lucretian background by the time she penned her friend's elegy. Rochester did promote the same sort of antipathy for religion as his Roman predecessor. He translated (without apologetic footnotes) a nihilistic passage from a play of Seneca's:

After Death nothing is, and nothing Death,
The utmost limit of a Gasp of Breath.
Let the ambitious Zealot lay aside
His hopes of Heaven; whose Faith is but his Pride.
Let slavish Souls lay by their Fear,
Nor be concern'd which way, nor where,
After this Life they shall be hurl'd;
Dead, we become the Lumber of the World. (Rochester 1-8)

What Rochester chooses to translate is more telling than how he translates it. While Creech translates the entirety of *De Rerum Natura* thus making the more controversial parts unavoidable, Rochester extracts from Seneca this passage which highlights Roman religious doubt. Though Seneca's stoic philosophy was rather more providential than his character's, this text echoes much of what Lucretius says—that there is no after life and thus one must not be anxious about whether they end up in a good or bad place.¹⁷ What

¹⁷ It is paramount to note that Behn would become closely connected to the thinking of Seneca in her translational work. In 1675, Behn ventured to one of her earliest forays into philosophical French texts when she translated La Rochefoucauld's edition of *Reflexions ou Sentences et Maximes morales*. Seneca's *Moral Epistles* (in which he praises Epicurus) are La Rochefoucauld's subject. In the case of Behn, her translation of La

matters is the present health and happiness of the body (which, again, excludes hedonistic behavior).

Moreover, in the same passage, Seneca's character states a similar belief that Behn and Lucretius extend—that fear-inducing deities are man-made and exercise societal control. Rochester translates:

God's everlasting fiery Jayls,
(Devis'd by Rogues, dreaded by Fools)
With his grim grisly Dog that keeps the Door,
Are senseless Stories, idle Tales,
Dreams, Whimsies, and no more. (14-18)

Thus, Behn's inclusion of Lucretius in her praise of Rochester reveals an interest in and certainly a respect for Lucretian and anti-religious¹⁸ strains of freethought even before Creech's publication.

Her close relationship with Rochester and her poem celebrating nearly all that was disdained by Rochester's critics were the sources of some tension in Behn's friendship with his cousin and fellow writer, Anne Wharton. In her praise of Behn's elegy to Rochester, Wharton still provides some critique for her friend and colleague: she advises that Behn avoid the libertine writings that her cousin enjoyed. She urges Behn to "Scorn

Rochefoucauld's work was entitled *Seneca Unmasked*—a title sure to attract a curious reader familiar with the controversial nature of the Roman philosopher.

¹⁸ As the term "anti-religious" will be used frequently throughout this essay, it is important to distinguish that, in this paper, it is not to be conflated with "atheism". Anti-religion, for the purposes of this essay, is the questioning and challenging of institutionalized doctrine propagated by religious organizations—organizations that scholars like Behn would see as be roadblocks to natural philosophy. "Anti-religion" should be read to be shorthand for "anti-religious establishment and anti-religiously enforced thought".

meaner themes, declining low desire, / And bid [her] Muse maintain a Vestal fire” (Wharton 22-23). This “Vestal fire” refers to the Roman pagan tradition of Vestal Virgins—high class priestesses who maintained a religious fire in the middle of the city. Wharton’s plea that Behn maintain such a fire could just as well be translated to read “put on a more virginal façade in your writings”.

Ignoring her friend’s advice, Behn maintains her relationship with Rochester posthumously even after her elegiac poem. In “To the Unknown Daphnis”, she spends nearly as much time praising Rochester as she does praising Creech. She concludes her commendations by exclaiming, “No sooner was fam’d Strephons Glory set, / Strephons the soft, the Lovely, Gay and Great; / But Daphnis rises like the Morning Star” (“To the Unknown Daphnis” 107-109). In Behn’s construction of the intellectual community that is Wadham Colledge, Lucretian ideals are passed on to Wadham, and Wadham passes a tradition of freethought onto its students such as Sprat, Creech, and Rochester. Likewise, throughout Creech’s translation as she sees it, Creech passes on the torch of libertine thought to Behn because of his translation. Behn, through her creation of this rhetorically constructed chain of free thought, details multiple strains of linearity. She establishes a connection from Lucretius to Wadham College, specifically through the connection of Sprat and Creech, both of whom recognize parallels between Lucretian context and doctrine and Restoration context and doctrine. She also creates a legacy of intellectual critique from Sprat to Rochester to Creech which stems from shared interest—Lucretius. As Behn praises the work of these men, she also creates a sense of lineage between herself, Wadham students, and Lucretius. She establishes her own pseudo-college of sorts, one which she can enter.

Perhaps, Behn views this collective or, more broadly, the Oxford University system as resembling the pastoral Golden Age. Behn's poetic preoccupation with the fictionalized ideal of the "Golden Age" celebrates an absence of physical needs and an abundance of free and equitable discourse.¹⁹ Just as the Epicurean garden allows women to enter the conversation, so too does Behn's fictional pastoral ideal of the Golden Age. By invoking the motifs of the pastoral with the philosophy of a gender-inclusive Epicureanism as she sees it, Behn draws from two classically idyllic "gardens" in order to defend her entry into this freethinking circle.

Behn thus weaves together many strains of thought throughout "To the Unknown Daphnis": the pastoral with the Epicurean, the politically conservative with the religiously rebellious, an assertion of gender norms within a celebration of gender liberation. In "To the Unknown Daphnis", these ideas coexist and interact with one another in complex and dynamic conversation. Though many times Behn's views appear to contradict within her body of work, Behn as a freethinker seems to avoid such absolutes of knowledge and instead celebrates a fluctuating process of questioning and debate. As such, Behn's praise of Creech's translation provides Behn not only a means to prove herself adept in different libertine intellectual discussions of the later seventeenth century, but also a vehicle for her to present rather radical ideals that exist far beyond the rhetoric of women's sexuality and rights. Instead, Behn participates in the theological and philosophical discussions that perplexed the greatest thinkers of the Restoration and asserts her place among them. Yet

¹⁹ Behn's most frequent poetic mode is in fact pastoral. Just as she does in "To the Unknown Daphnis", Behn refers to people (usually fellow writers) in her life by pseudonyms that are consistent across different poems. She even pens a poem entitled, "The Golden Age", which celebrates gender equality, a desire for simplicity, and equitable conversation.

her radical interpretation of the Wadham collective and her connection to Rochester makes her a misfit within this idealized community.

Oroonoko: Traces of Lucretius and Anti-Religion

Oroonoko²⁰ as Religious Commentator

Behn's controversial streak continues with her discussion of colonial and race relations in her novella *Oroonoko* (1688), yet few scholars have drawn parallels between the philosophy of "To the Unknown Daphnis" and the religious commentary found in the oft-studied novella. While eighteenth-century critics such as Dibdin criticize "her [narrator's] platonic intimacy with Oroonoko", such a critique overlooks the anti-religious and freethinking themes that dominate the text in favor of a racially centered reading (Dibdin 199). An exception is Laura Rosenthal, who notes the agnostic trends within *Oroonoko*. She notes that the conversion of Oroonoko to white Christianity "seems a more and more distant possibility as 'Christian' comes to mean the same thing as 'liar'" (Rosenthal 152). Rosenthal, later in her essay, muses in passing, "Perhaps it was in Surinam too that the author began to lose her faith", but the question remains unanswered and underexplored in regards to how Oroonoko's position on faith reflects Behn's (154). Indeed, throughout the text, Oroonoko defames Christianity as a whole, particularly in regards to his own betrayal and brutalization at the hands of Christian colonizers. Behn, in *Oroonoko*, carefully positions such defamation after her protagonist has been instructed in and exposed to Christianity in both theory and practice. Thus, Oroonoko

²⁰ Oroonoko is also called "Caesar" when he reaches Surinam, because of his Roman features. The two names will be used interchangeably, as they are in the novella.

provides a useful and educated “outsider” conduit through which Behn can project her own religious critique.

Oroonoko makes overtly negative statements against Christianity, calling Christian gods “the vilest of all creeping things” with no “power to make them just, brave or honest”, while declaring “there was no faith in the white men or the gods they adored who instructed them in principles so false that honest men could not live amongst them” (*Oroonoko* 66). These proclamations come at the end of the narrative, in which Oroonoko has been betrayed by the white men who have been his companions. Behn places her hero in close connection with white Christians in order to make him an expert foreign observer of Christian hypocrisy.

Behn does not shy from corroborating the very hypocrisy Oroonoko unveils. The narrator often points to hypocritical practices among the white people that run counter to Christian doctrine. She writes that for the white people, “Sunday was their day of debauch” where “all the whites were overtaken in drink” (*Oroonoko* 61). However, it is not just the dubious nature of Christian morality in the midst of a slave trade to which Oroonoko draws attention. The narrator, who claims Oroonoko as her friend, is called “his Great Mistress” (49). She claims that she can speak to him comfortably about “the lives of the Romans” and of Christian thought (49). She writes, “But of all the discourses Caesar liked the worst, and would never be reconciled to our notions of the Trinity, of which he ever made a jest; it was a riddle, he said, would turn his brain to conceive, and one could not make him understand what faith was” (49).

To posit anti-trinitarian thought through this text suggests that Behn was aware of the rising doubt surrounding trinitarian theology among heterodox thinkers. A denial of

the Trinity was an especially dangerous stance in this period, and Behn seems aware. She is able to disassociate herself from such doubt through the racial other. As she does with her portrayal black, anti-religious monarchal power in her play *Abdelazer*, Behn projects her own hostility towards institutional religion via an unlikely mouthpiece—her black protagonist.

It is what Behn excludes from *Oroonoko* that makes the author's antagonism towards orthodox thinking especially clear. For instance, Oroonoko contrasts his captors' Christian faith with their cruel actions towards him. He cites that in his "suffering [he] gain[s] so true a knowledge both of [the captain] and of [Christian] gods" (*Oroonoko* 41). Where Behn could contest this statement by including exonerative actions from the white characters in Surinam, she refuses, even when it comes to herself. By her own avatar's inability to show true benevolence to Oroonoko through her absence during his rebellion and death, Behn defends her protagonists' argument so far that it the hypocrisy even extends to the narrator as a member of the white Christian society.

Through this close connection between betrayal and Christian faith, Behn constructs Oroonoko as a careful reader of Western white and colonial civilization. To establish this identity of her protagonist, Behn makes Oroonoko a translator of sorts to the natives for his group of cohorts in Surinam. The narrator explains, "Caesar begot so good an understanding between the Indians and the English that there were no more fears or heartburnings during our stay, but we had perfect, open and free trade with them" (60). Oroonoko is thus an amiable bridge for both the English to speak to the natives, just as he is a bridge between Behn the freethinker and her audience.

Though Oroonoko is her most famous black protagonist, Behn draws upon the racial but politically astute other in an earlier play—her only tragedy, *Abdelazer or the Moor's Revenge*. The play, written in 1676, shares some of the same sympathetic treatment of black people, yet varies in its approach—Abdelazer is not memorialized honorably like Oroonoko. However, both the play and the novella serve to critique the blind faith in church and state that are representative of white-centric Christianized society. Like Oroonoko, Abdelazer is African royalty but has been conquered by a white power—Oroonoko at the hands of a duplicitous slave trader and Abdelazer at his father's fall to Spanish colonial powers. While Oroonoko works for his freedom, Abdelazer works to conquer—a feat which he achieves briefly by seducing the Spanish queen. He fleetingly reigns as king before he is usurped by Prince Phillip. As Abdelazer fights the racist and patrilineal forces that work against him, he criticizes the Spanish supporters of Prince Phillip and the Catholic Cardinal. He calls them “[t]housands of Bigots who think to cheat the World / Into an Opinion, that fighting for the Cardinal is a pious work” (*Abdelazer* 4.3.434). He goes on to say, “Thy giddy Rout are guided by Religion / More than by Justice, Reason, or Allegiance” (4.7.444).

Thus, the themes present in *Abdelazer* and *Oroonoko* reflect those that Behn would place in her own words when she celebrates the Creech translation of *De Rerum Natura*. While her black protagonists are assumed pagan because of their ethnicity and low status in white society, Behn reveals a particular strain of radical libertine thought in these characters that is only available to those who truly understand the principles of Christianity. She presents these same thematic elements in her own discussion of the

Lucretius translation. Her disdain for those that blindly support a religion at the expense of rational philosophy reflects her characters' disdain for a Christian society that rarely acts on Christian principles. She, like her protagonists, questions the authority of a faith that seems to be the "Secure Retreat" of arguments that are thwarted. Her connection to Oroonoko and Abdelazer does not necessarily suggest a proto-abolitionist approach towards the racial other, but indeed, she appears to have recognized a sort of shared status between her and her protagonists. Like Behn in relations to scholars from Wadham College, Oroonoko and Abdelazer are allowed to speak in philosophical discourses but not to truly converse. They, like she, see themselves as outside observers due to their educational and discursive opportunities.

Because of this shared status, it is not surprising then that Behn creates a "Epicurean Garden" in *Oroonoko* in which the narrator, Caesar, and the other women in Surinam can talk of philosophy. She establishes a sense of ease in discussion that is quite the respite from the duplicitous actions of the white men. She writes that Oroonoko "liked the company of us women much above the men.... So that obliging to him to love us very well, we had all the liberty of speech with him, especially myself, whom he called his Great Mistress; and indeed my word would go a great way with him" (*Oroonoko* 49).

As described before, the Epicurean Garden was notorious for its inclusivity of different genders and class backgrounds. What is unique about the garden in *Oroonoko* is that Behn's fictionalized avatar (the narrator) serves as the leader and educator of the group. It is she who describes theological principles and she who educates Oroonoko on the history of Western civilization. The narrator boasts, "I entertained [Oroonoko] with

the lives of the Romans, and great men, which charmed him to my company” (49).

Indeed, the narrator even compares her garden to the Italian landscape. When detailing the natural elements of her new home, the narrator praises, “Not all the gardens of boasted Italy can produce a shade to out-vie this which Nature had joined with Art to render so exceeding fine” (*Oroonoko* 52). By placing Epicurean-style conversation in her own garden, Behn emulates and controls the dialogue of freethought in Surinam.

However, in an oft overlooked element of this portion of the novella, the narrator includes not only Oroonoko in the garden, but Imoinda, his lover and wife. When speaking to Imoinda, the narrator stylizes her content according to her gender. She teaches Imoinda “all the pretty works that [she] was mistress of, ...telling her stories of nuns, and endeavouring to bring her to the knowledge of the true God” (49). Though Caesar is offered the opportunity to dispute the validity of trinitarian doctrine, Behn oddly limits Imoinda’s involvement in these philosophical conversations. She educates her about those who serve God chastely and women who believe wholeheartedly the teachings of Christian doctrine. Thus, she excludes Imoinda from discussion and debate but not from learning on the whole.²¹

Behn’s narrator takes on a highly masculinized role as both teacher and censor. She withholds difficult philosophical ideas from Imoinda yet challenges Caesar. Behn constructs a mock educational system in her Surinam garden—one in which she dictates

²¹ Behn’s exclusion of Imoinda from the controversial discussion is perhaps further aligns Behn’s avatar with Oroonoko. Oroonoko argues for an exceptionalism to his blackness that should prevent him from being captive to white slaveholders—he does not argue for abolition in totality. Perhaps, Behn is suggesting the same as Oroonoko in regards to her inclusion of women in the context of philosophical discourse. In excluding Imoinda, Behn makes herself the exceptional woman, not a pan-female liberator.

who learns what based on gender. Perhaps the narrator's discernment reconstructs the educational system in which women are excluded from the rhetoric of doubt. Indeed, Behn's avatar, though open about her gender, rarely draws attention to it until it is most convenient for her. The narrator—who is able to watch Oroonoko conquer beasts with his bare hands, capture electric eels, and question the epistemological authority of Christianity without a sense of concern—suddenly turns “but sickly, and very apt to fall into fits of dangerous illness upon any extraordinary melancholy” (*Oroonoko* 75). She does this so as to distance herself from the brutalization and murder of Oroonoko at the end—a plot device that reinstates Behn's character into the decidedly white and feminine realm that she is supposed to operate within all along. Though they offer each other a glimpse into thought from separate spheres of the world, by the end, Behn's narrator is of the white Christian class yet again, while Oroonoko is made the outside other.

That *Oroonoko* was written nearly six years after the first publication of Creech's translation of *De Rerum Natura* would suggest that she had Lucretian and Epicurean ideals in the back of her mind as she drew the decidedly anti-religious figure of Oroonoko. The same libertine thought that is expressed in her praise of both Rochester's work and Creech's translation exists in the rhetoric of *Oroonoko* and *Abdelazer*. Oroonoko distrusts the establishment of Christianity and those that work to enforce it. To him, Christianity does not align with rational thinking. Instead, he argues that Christians “wanted only but to be whipped into the knowledge of the Christian gods” (*Oroonoko* 66). Oroonoko stresses that Christians are not to be trusted, stating that “with them a man out be eternally on his guard and never to eat and drink with Christians without his weapon of defence in his hand, and, for his own security, never to credit one word they

spoke” (66). As noted before, Behn only reiterates Oroonoko’s condemnation by the duplicitous actions of the white people in the novella.

Oroonoko’s status as the other in Surinam allows Behn to discredit her anti-religious mouthpiece insofar as it aids her own perception as the author. In spite of the benefits Behn reaps from the audiences’ stereotypes of Caesar as a raving pagan foreigner, she attempts throughout the novella to reverse his social status in the mind of the reader.²² In the same language with which she memorializes Creech and Rochester, she honors Oroonoko after his gruesome death at the stake in the wake of his failed rebellion. She mourns:

Thus died this great man, worthy of a better fate and more sublime wit than mine
to write his praise. Yet, I hope the reputation of my pen is considerable enough to
make his glorious name to survive to all ages, with that of the brave, the beautiful
and the constant Imoinda. (*Oroonoko* 76-77)

Behn draws a rhetorical parallel between her praise of Oroonoko the Philosopher and the men that she praises in English intellectual circles. Behn often belittles herself in her commendation of freethinkers. In “To the Unknown Daphnis”, she writes “But I unlearn’d in Schools disdain that Mine / Should treated at any feast but Thine” (23-24). She performs a similar diminishment of her power as a writer in her poem “On the Death of E. Waller, Esq.”, a poem she penned upon the death of Restoration poet Edmund

²² This is not to suggest that his social reversal in Behn’s prose is for abolitionist purposes. Oroonoko himself will go on in the novella to argue for a certain brand of slavery (i.e. when a people have been conquered, when people prove to be “brutish” by Oroonoko’s standards, etc.). Oroonoko argues for a sort of principle of exceptionalism that does not include him in the ranks of slaves but does not argue that every person should be necessarily free from slavery.

Waller (1606-1687).²³ In this text, her self-deprecation extends to both her health and her gender: “The Wit Sublime, the Judgment Find, and Strong; / Whilst mine, like Transitory Flowers, decay, / That come back to deck thy Tomb a short-liv’d Day” (21-23). Behn thus imitates the language and power structure of her panegyric poetry to English thinkers in discussing her African philosopher.

Yet, Behn does not limit her praise to that of Oroonoko. She still concludes the text with a reference to Imoinda. As with the scene of the Epicurean/Surinam garden, Imoinda is brought in subtly but intentionally. Just as she enters in the debates of the day (albeit in a censored fashion), Imoinda is included in the celebration of her partner as a crucial factor in his impression upon the Surinam community. Though Oroonoko is the one who advertises Epicurean theological doubts, Imoinda is included in the discussion as a moral reminder of his goodness in spite of his anti-religious thought. Imoinda is a chaste and loyal wife to a controversial man. Perhaps Behn, through the education and posthumous praise of Imoinda, sought to show that morality is not contingent upon Christian-institutionalized thought. For instance, though Imoinda is taught about the Catholic Church, she is never said to believe in or convert to any of the Christian doctrines she is taught. Though the men of the camp say that Imoinda (who is referred to as Clemene in Surinam) has been “christened”, there is little indication that this was in concurrence with her will (45). In fact, it is suggested that they perform the religious rite simply so they feel better about sexually pursuing her—an act proved yet again futile as

²³ Edmund Waller was a well-respected poet by the Restoration, but during the Civil War had floundered many times between pro-parliamentary and pro-monarchal positions. By the time Behn wrote his elegy, Waller had the respect of men such as John Dryden. Celebrating his clout may have advanced her own poetry as a litmus test for seventeenth-century literary taste.

she “denies [them] all with noble disdain” (45). This disdain is characterized as so noble that they even refuse to rape her.

Furthermore, the way Imoinda dies suggests that she did not believe in Christian doctrines against suicide. Indeed, in her death she does not reference a god at all. Still, her suicide is celebrated by the narrator as a stoic action. After Oroonoko and Imoinda decide that killing her would be the best option, Behn writes:

While tears trickled down his cheeks, hers were smiling with joy she should die by so

noble a hand and be sent in her own country (for that is their notion of the next world) by

him she so tenderly loved and so truly adored in this; for wives have a respect for their husbands equal to what other people pay a deity.... It being thus, you may believe the deed was soon resolved on, and it is not to be doubted but the parting, the eternal leave-taking of two such lovers... must be very moving. (*Oroonoko* 71-72)

This passage is extraordinary in the narrator’s praise of the sacrificial and suicidal choice Imoinda makes, as it runs counter traditional Christian doctrine that suicide, at all costs, is a sin.²⁴ Imoinda’s understanding of an afterlife is acknowledged, and yet, Behn casts doubt that her notion of eternity is necessarily true. Instead Behn calls the lovers’ parting “eternal”, insinuating that there would be no afterlife in which Oroonoko and Imoinda could reunite.

²⁴ Possibly, Behn makes a nod to scholars such as Donne, who in *Biathanatos* argues that there are noble reasons to choose suicide. Escaping slavery and honoring one’s husband could have certainly been considered in his argument.

Moreover, just as Behn compares religious devotion to blind monarchal loyalty in “To the Unknown Daphnis”, she does the same here with Imoinda’s loyalty to and trust in her husband. In this passage however, Behn calls those who are fervent in their belief of a higher power “other people”. In distancing her narrator from those that are devout deists, she places her in much more common conversation with the two atheistic protagonists who are committing what many Restoration Christians would call a mortal sin. Regardless of her suicide, Imoinda is still “brave” and “constant” in the eyes of the narrator. Behn echoes her praise of Lucretius in her praise of Oroonoko’s wife. To Behn, Oroonoko and Imoinda’s act of murder-suicide and rebellion against the white order is just further proof that “whoever had heard [Oroonoko] speak would have been convinced of their errors that all fine wit is confined to the white men, especially to those of Christendom” (15). With this consideration of uprising and religious skepticism, Behn seems to argue at the very least that Christianity is not the only lens through which to answer philosophical and cosmic questions.

This scene puts Imoinda through the “Romanization” that Oroonoko undergoes within the text.²⁵ Suicide was often celebrated in Roman culture to save one’s honor in the face of military or political defeat. While disassociated from the realm of combat or government, Lucretius himself was said to have committed suicide having been driven to madness by his philosophical doctrines. Imoinda’s suicide is then in the tradition of not

²⁵ Behn calls the reader’s attention to his Roman qualities from the start, famously referring to him as Caesar upon his arrival and noting that his “nose was rising and Roman instead of African and flat” (*Oroonoko* 15). From the introduction of Oroonoko, the narrator establishes the protagonists’ uncanny knowledge of Western civilization and history. Even while in Africa, Oroonoko is said to have “heard of and admired the Romans” (14). He astutely references famous Roman enemies and wars later in the text.

only Roman stoics but also Lucretius. Thus, Imoinda is, like Oroonoko, developed into a model of the stoicized Epicurean.

Behn's development of Oroonoko as "Roman" has been well-documented and commented upon in critical treatments. David E. Hoegberg argues that Behn's portrayal of Oroonoko's story is one that closely aligns with Achilles or Julius Caesar. He contends that these close classical connections "tell a story of Oroonoko's struggle against less tangible forces of ideology and belief" (Hoegberg 240). He goes on to suggest that Oroonoko's death parallels that of Julius Caesar's own murder at the hand of his political and ideological enemies: "By condemning Oroonoko to the fate of Caesar, the whites also condemn themselves to the fate of Caesar's enemies, unconsciously admitting their guilt" (240).

However, such criticism leaves open the place of Behn's narrator as both Oroonoko's friend and a member of the white community. Her blame in Oroonoko's downfall is one of absence and passivity. Where she is his active observer and philosophical sparring partner, her concern for Oroonoko only extends as far as it benefits her intellectual endeavors. Oroonoko is a figure that enlivens her written pursuits, and his presence in her garden allows her to engage with a male freethinker. It is possible that what the narrator wants to preserve is not Oroonoko's life or even dignity in the mind of the reader, but his structural commentary on the blindness of following Christian-institutionalized beliefs. Though she does not attempt to save his body, the narrator well-documents the ways in which Oroonoko destabilizes what the narrator and the white community assume to be true. In this way, the narrator's apathy toward Oroonoko's

corporeal salvation suggests that the ideology of Oroonoko was much more important to Behn in writing this novella than Oroonoko as an actual character.

Oroonoko as Lucretian Figure

Though few believe the account of Oroonoko to be factual as Behn attempts to persuade us, the narrator's absence from, yet detailed account of, Oroonoko's death is a moment in which Behn's fluctuating narrative voice gives away that he is a creation of her own imagination. The question is, for what purpose? Behn creates Oroonoko as an embodied Lucretian figure—not as Lucretius himself but as a model of Memmius. Memmius functions as Lucretius' student whom he addresses within *De Rerum Natura*. Throughout the ancient text, Lucretius works to purge the young student from the fear of death so that Memmius may enter into a state of “ataraxia”—which entails a fearlessness towards the afterlife and death. Memmius is Lucretius' hoped-for legacy. Lucretius calls to him at the start of the text:

Thee do I crave a co-partner in that verse
Which I presume on Nature to compose
For Memmius mine, whom thou hast will to be
Peerless in grace at every hour-
Wherefore indeed, Divine one, give my words
Immortal charm. (Lucretius I. 25-29).

Despite Memmius' presence in Lucretius' text, he never achieves this pure state of “ataraxia”, falling into human passion that Lucretius often condemns.²⁶ This essay has

²⁶ It has been suggested that, due rather abrupt ending of *De Rerum Natura* with the description of the fire and death of the plague of Athens, that Lucretius' text is left

already established the many moments in which Oroonoko purports ideals that are reminiscent of Lucretian philosophy. In addition to his Romanization and Epicurean echoes, Oroonoko's friendship with both his French tutor and Behn's avatar emulate the relationship between Memmius and his teacher, Lucretius.

At first glance, the inclusion of the French tutor seems utilitarian. Behn would benefit from explaining how this African prince has such a deep knowledge of the language, practices, and histories of the Western world. Yet, Behn's decision to bring this French tutor to Surinam suggests an inclusion of the French freethinking tradition to her novella. Her intention with the French tutor is made particularly clear when it is discovered that he holds philosophies so problematic that she eventually must remove him from the narrative.

At this point in Behn's career, she was deeply interested in French libertine thought. As will be developed later in this paper, Behn's translations provide an English contemporary point of view to late seventeenth-century French libertinism. The Frenchman is, from the start, closely connected to Oroonoko's education. Behn praises Oroonoko's care of his army as he is promoted to general during his career in West Africa, with the tutor as a source of his moral fiber:

Some part of [his character] we may attribute to the care of a Frenchman of wit and learning, who finding it turn to very good account to be a sort of royal tutor to this young black, and perceiving him very ready, apt and quick of apprehension,

unfinished. This would potentially explain Memmius' failure to realize and carry on his master's teachings. However, other scholars read the end of *De Rerum Natura* as a true testament to the chaos and futility of humanity's attempts to immortalize themselves—and perhaps the futile attempts to fully convert man (i.e. Memmius) to the true state of “ataraxia”.

took great pleasure to teach him morals, language and science, and was for it extremely beloved and valued by him. (*Oroonoko* 14)

Just as the tutor is introduced in this passage unnamed, he remains so throughout the novella—a shadowy figure that never speaks but is almost always present in the first half of the text.

As with Lucretius and Memmius, Oroonoko and the Frenchman operate under a mentor-mentee relationship. Their relationship is close enough that the narrator draws attention to the fact that Oroonoko is fluent in both English and French. While Oroonoko's proficiency in English is fostered by his trade relations with the British businessmen, his only interaction with French speakers is with his tutor. For him to achieve this fluency, his relationship to the Frenchman must have been lengthy and intimate. Behn is clear about the profound influence that the Frenchman has on the young general around the time of his betrayal to the white slave traders. It is revealed shortly prior to their capture that the Frenchman is so closely tied to Oroonoko that he is there to support him through the transaction and eventual capture. Behn refers to him here as the "French governor he had from his childhood" and yet again stresses that he is "a man of admirable wit, great ingenuity and learning, all which he had infused into his young pupil" (35). The mention of Oroonoko's education serves no clear plot point here, except perhaps to reinforce the educational status of the new slave in the face of his capture.

Yet, it is just as likely that Behn puts the elusive Frenchman in this scene of forced westward departure to physically symbolize Oroonoko's transport of French *and* Lucretian libertinism to the English-colonized Surinam. Indeed, when Behn acknowledges the Frenchman's presence, she also provides the reader with essential

background information: “This Frenchman was banished out of his own country from some heretical notions he held; and though he was a man of very little religion, he had admirable morals and a brave soul” (35). The Frenchman, thus, becomes the embodiment of a libertine. He is, in essence, the pedagogical source of Oroonoko’s anti-religious doubts. The Frenchman, if he were to have taught Oroonoko about Western culture as intimately as the narrator suggests, is certain to have imparted his own religious skepticism, which, in turn, the hypocrisy of the Surinam Christians confirms.

It is crucial then that the Frenchman is captured *with* the West Africans. Behn sets the kidnapping scene by reminding the reader of the tutor’s presence. When the white captain arrives, “Oroonoko [is] extremely delighted, at who met him on the shore, attended by his French governor, Jamoan, Aboan and about a hundred of the nobles youths of the court” (37). Oroonoko brings with him his peers and advisors. The Frenchman is the odd man out in age and ethnonational background. This racial and age distinction does not prevent him from the kidnapping. After Oroonoko gets drunk on the white tradesman’s boat, he is captured, and “[t]he same treachery was used to all the rest; and all in one instant the several places of the ship, were lashed fast in irons and betrayed the slavery. That great design over, they set all hands to work to hoist the sail” (37). That the libertine tutor sets sail to Surinam, a place dominated by Anglo-Christians, suggests that Behn wishes to bring libertinism physically to the Christianized Western sphere. Furthermore, due to his exile at the hands of the white-dominated French court and subsequent capture by the English tradesmen, the Frenchman embodies the hostility that is directed towards libertine thinkers in the European intellectual community and literally is placed in the same boat as those who are made slaves due to their skin color.

However, Behn clearly recognizes that though the Frenchman is treated disdainfully for his connection to the West African peoples and freethinking spheres, he is not subject to the same oppression as Oroonoko. The English captain's conflict in regards to what to do with his French captive perfectly delineates between the Frenchman's status and that of Oroonoko's. Oroonoko not only questions the "word of a Christian" following the captain's betrayal, but also inspires a hunger strike among his fellow captives:

The captain pondering and consulting what to do, it was concluded that nothing but Oroonoko's liberty would encourage any of the rest to eat, except the Frenchman, whom the captain could not pretend to keep prisoner, but only told him, he was secured because he might act something in favour of the prince, but that he should be freed as soon as they came to land. (39).

The Frenchman is liaison here to the white settlers. His skin tone and national background permit him to speak on behalf of his pupil in spite of his student's insistence on doubting and demonizing the religious framework of the captain's homeland. Just as the Frenchman speaks for and inspires the anti-religious rhetoric of Oroonoko, Behn inspires and writes the anti-religious rhetoric Oroonoko speaks. It is through Oroonoko as a mouthpiece that Behn is able to reiterate her own philosophical sentiments that can be traced throughout her poetry, essays, and translational work.

Behn's narrator never truly meets the Frenchman in scene, yet references him one last time in a curious moment just before she meets Imoinda (Clemene) after her reunion with Caesar:

I was as impatient to make these lovers a visit, having already made a friendship with Caesar, and from his own mouth learned what I have related which was confirmed by his Frenchman who was set on shore to seek his fortune, and of whom they could not make a slave, because a Christian. (47)

Throughout the first half of the novel, Behn conflates the philosophical principles of teacher and student, so much so that the two's ideologies only become distinguishable in terms of racial perception when confronted with white Christianity. Though the Frenchman has been exiled for "heretical notions", his status as a libertine is legitimized because of his European roots. Christianity thus becomes not a belief but an ethnonational, masculinized identity to wield power and moral authority without necessarily having grounds to do so (as Behn would say, "the Secure Retreat of a routed Argument"). Behn continues to showcase through *Oroonoko* the inherent hypocrisy in the Christian colonizers—in fact, one could argue that the entire novella is structured to prove such. Though it is said that the Frenchman "came daily to Parnham Hill to see and pay his respects to his pupil prince", he is still free, able to wield his intellectual ideals in the realm of the white world once again—through and because of the social status of his student (47). Thus, the dangers of confronting a libertine depends on the person's position within the dominant culture, and indeed, the differences in treatment between Oroonoko and the Frenchman closely resemble the same disparities Behn explicates in her treatment of her own intellectual exclusion.

In the same sentence in which the Frenchman disappears towards freedom, the narrator begins to stress her kinship with the new slave. While the Frenchman, in the Eden-like West Africa, serves as the Lucretius to Oroonoko's Memmius, this role is

supplanted by an Epicurus-Lucretius relationship in the locus of the narrator's garden in Surinam. Though it is suggested that the relationship is ongoing between the French tutor and his pupil, Behn never includes the Frenchman in the garden. Just like the narrator, the tutor is entirely absent when Oroonoko's body is threatened but, like the narrator, remains crucially invested in the preservation of his story and ideals.

Behn often corroborates events in Oroonoko's life in West Africa through qualifiers such as, "which was confirmed by his Frenchman" (47). In doing so, the Frenchman and the narrator become co-authors of Oroonoko's journey with the tutor covering the first half and the narrator covering the second. They retain the intellectual impression of Oroonoko, but not the corporeal Oroonoko. That the narrator replaces the Frenchman's role as Oroonoko's educator in religious skepticism further imitates Behn's real-life preoccupation with French freethought. She would translate French freethinkers frequently in the 1680s. Just as Behn's narrator carries on the French skeptical tradition in English-colonized Surinam, so does Behn, as translator and critic, carry on the French skeptical tradition in England.

Oroonoko appears to embody this tradition of theological doubt quite well. His speeches against Christianity are indicative of the questions facing religious faith in late seventeenth-century western European Christianity, and much of his discourse resembles the rhetoric of doubt found within Lucretius' writing. In certain regards, Oroonoko appears to reach a state of ataraxia by the end of the novella. He does not fear the repercussions of the afterlife much in the way Lucretius sought to inspire Memmius. Oroonoko's particularly brutal death is punctuated by his seeming ease:

[W]ith an ill-favoured knife, they cut his ears and his nose, and burned them; he still smoked on, as if nothing had touched him. Then they hacked off one of his arms, and still he bore up, and held his pipe. But at the cutting off the other arm, his head sunk, and his pipe dropped, and he gave up the ghost without a groan or reproach. (76)

His ability to mask his pain and fear at the hands of his captors truly embodies Lucretian ideals of acceptance of death. Though she remains coy about the details of his physicality in other portions of the text, Behn does not shy away from the gruesomeness of his murder, as though to prove Oroonoko a stoicized Epicurean.

Alma Massaro argues in her essay on Lucretian ideals of ataraxia that this fearlessness towards death creates a sort of sympathy in Lucretian thought for the animal. Animals preserve their bodies but do not fear death nor have notions of an afterlife. Massaro writes, “Humans...ignoring the laws of nature, spend a great part of their lives caring about things...which are extraneous to the Epicurean ideal of ataraxia; in contrast, animals, being faithful to the laws of nature, are completely devoid of these anxieties” (Massaro 46). Indeed, Behn attempts to draw parallels among Oroonoko, animals, and natural law.

Oroonoko speaks to the laws of nature with confidence, citing “that honour was the first principle in Nature that was to be obeyed”. (*Oroonoko* 62). He also, upon the death of Imoinda, takes on the form of an unnamed animal. Behn writes that in his grief, “he roared like some monster of the wood, calling on the loved name of Imoinda” (72). Katherine Acheson notes that Behn portrays Oroonoko as “both perceived and perceiver, animal and human”, and his “stirring speech about the degradation of his people as badly

treated animals, and his own horrifying vivisection at the end of the story—dramatize the contradictions between the modes of representing animals that Behn inventories in the novel” (9). Oroonoko’s transformative connection to the realm of the animal suggests an interspecies fluidity that has roots in Lucretian philosophy. As Massaro notes, in *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius posits a highly non-anthropocentric view of interspecies hierarchy because all life is made of the same matter—atoms.

Lucretius frequently compares and conflates the animal and the human. For example, he calls upon Memmius to be an animalistic hunter in his pursuit of higher reasoning:

As dogs full oft with noses on the ground,
Find out the silent lairs, though hid in brush,
Of beasts, the mountain-rangers, when but once
They scent the certain footsteps of the way,
Thus thou thyself in themes like these alone
Can hunt from thought to thought, and keenly wind
Along even onward to the secret places
And drag out truth. (Lucretius I.398-417)

Similar non-anthropocentric images appear throughout *De Rerum Natura*. For instance, Lucretius posits similarities between domesticated animal pleasure and female sexual pleasure with a husband. He denotes animal’s and human’s shared ability to express emotions, develop intelligence, and display anxieties. Even Lucretius’ creation story provides agency to Nature as a generative, intelligent being. Nature creates the world by its own power and will in a highly feminized way—the world hatches from Nature’s

womb. Lucretius closes his creation story with a non-anthropocentric statement: “For all things grow and gather strength through time / In like proportions” (V.819-820). In many ways, Lucretius sees human evolution towards vanity and power as a regression, while animals’ ability to embrace their fate leads to a higher understanding and acceptance of their mortality.²⁷

Yet, Oroonoko is not a true Lucretian, and it is through Behn’s Romanization of Oroonoko that she demonstrates the highly incompatible relationship between Roman qualities and Lucretian philosophy. Epicureanism, manifest in Lucretius, is decidedly anti-romance, apolitical, and anti-militarism, whereas Oroonoko’s embodiment of Roman ideals encompasses all of these characteristics. For example, before they reach Surinam, Oroonoko and Imoinda’s love story resembles something of a Greek or Roman comedy. An old king, described as “jealous to the last degree” of the young prince’s appeal, seeks to conquer Imoinda through rape which is protected by his legal immunity (27). Through trickery, her chastity remains intact, and she returns untouched to her young lover. The narrative closely resembles a plot by the famous Roman playwrights, Plautus or Terence. The young lovers even speak in terms of Roman romantic dialogue. In their passionate but private betrothal, Behn writes, “After a thousand assurances of his lasting flame and her eternal empire over him, she condescended to receive him for her husband; or rather, received him as the greatest honour the gods could do her” (18). Certainly, Behn could be referencing the polytheistic traditions of Africa, but even so, such pagan parallels draw Oroonoko and Imoinda closer to the Roman mythical tradition than to the monotheistic

²⁷ This is certainly not to suggest that Behn’s portrayal of Oroonoko as animalistic is not extremely problematic in a “favorable” reading of her text. However, this is to suggest that there are multiple implications of such treatment.

framework of the English colonizers.²⁸ In referencing both the pagan and the imperial themes of Roman devotion, Behn creates a language that places their love story within the Western classical tradition.

Through this narrative, Imoinda is Romanized as well. Her dedicated chastity is reminiscent of Roman standards of *pudicitia*²⁹, and her virginal status is often described in the terms of Roman gods, not Christian. For instance, when noting the white men's unsuccessful attempts to sleep with her, Trefry details her refusal "as if she feared a rape even from the God of Day" (*Oroonoko* 45). The "God of Day" of course is in reference to Apollo. Not only does this allusion directly relate to Roman mythology, but it distances Imoinda from the Eve-like parallels established in her previous sexual interactions in the garden of West Africa.³⁰ She becomes, in Surinam, not figure of Eve, but instead, of a Lucretia or a Leda. Crucially, she does not fully resemble these Roman women's narratives until after she enters the Christianized world.

Just as the Western world attempts "overthrow" Imoinda's African identity, Oroonoko becomes all the more obsessed with conquering as an imitation of Western habits of violence. Though Lucretius asserts an equality between man and animal, in Surinam Oroonoko is decidedly a conqueror of both the animal and human world. The

²⁸ Janet Todd in her marginalia for her edition of *Oroonoko* notes that "[t]he religions of West Africa... tended to assume a supreme being, but more important were the lesser powers associated with a particular local natural phenomena" (84). However, Todd also notes that Behn might not have drawn on West African notions of deities at all, but from classical mythology.

²⁹ *Pudicitia* was the Roman ideal of female behavior in domestic and public spheres. It was not only concerned with the virginity of women, but the way they dressed, their legal status, and their marital prospects. *Pudicitia* could only be awarded to women from the higher echelons from society.

³⁰ Imoinda and Oroonoko are introduced as pre-fallen beings, dressed "as Adam and Eve did the fig-leaves" and in "the first state of innocence, before man knew how to sin" (11).

narrator makes quite the show of his hunting capabilities. In a long and strange section of the book, Behn notes Oroonoko's arrogance in his ability to conquer what the Englishmen cannot. Though he does succumb to its sting, he gawks at the notion that "a man could lose his force at the touch of an [electric eel]", and though he does succumb to shocks, he still holds onto the fish, which they eat for supper (*Oroonoko* 55).

Similarly, not once but twice does Oroonoko conquer a tiger. The first he kills by running a spear through its breast—an act read as a defense of the community. His obsession with surmounting the second tiger proves him more sportsman than protector. The Surinam people rumor of a tiger that many have failed to kill even after shooting it with bullets. When Caesar hears of this, "he had a mind to encounter this monster, and spoke with several gentlemen who had attempted her" (53). It is a goal which he achieves. The tiger's graphic death requires that Oroonoko wait for the tiger to become satiated after eating a sheep. When the tiger is languid, Oroonoko shoots it twice through the eye. The blow kills the tiger. His rather theatrical production after his success imitates a militaristic showcase after a war. When he discovers that the tiger survived despite having "seven bullets of lead in [the heart]", Oroonoko cuts out the heart and brings it to the village, "which [gave] Caesar occasion of many fine discourses, of accidents in war and strange escapes" (54-55).

Oroonoko's understanding of the Western world is not limited to hunting and romance but also includes a Roman understanding of militarized rebellion. Oroonoko openly frames his rebellion under the model of Roman military history. Behn writes, "he told them, that he had heard of one Hannibal, a great captain, had cut his way through mountains of solid rocks" (63). In addition, the slave that is most vocal in his support of

Oroonoko's revolt is named Tuscan. Tuscan is described as "a tall Negro of some more quality than the rest"; thus his stature among the slaves accredits him with his Roman name (63). He "bow[s] at the feet of Caesar", and though he questions the sanity of Oroonoko's plans, he supports him in the end—a political alliance that allows for Oroonoko to acquire a military (64).

In contrast, Lucretius mocks man's dotage, even in sleep, on what he wishes to master. In sleep, Lucretius writes, man seeks to conquer in a different way, as the "Commanders they to fight and go at frays, / Sailors to live in combat with the winds" (Lucretius IV.1197-1198). He characterizes man's need to overcome others as folly:

Thus all pursuits

All arts in general seem in sleeps to mock

And master the minds of men. And whosoever

Day after day for long to games have given

Attention undivided, still they keep...

Those games with their own sense, open paths

Within the mind wherethrough the idol-films

Of those games came come. (IV.1203-1210).

Significantly, this same passage, which captures Lucretian antagonism towards the "games" or "idol-films" of human ambition, compares these pursuits to a dog that barks at night or a horse that moves its hooves in a faux-chase. Yet again, Lucretius repudiates human senses of superiority and equates humanity to animals. Oroonoko's pursuit of such "games" makes him an unruly student and not a master Epicurean. Indeed, Oroonoko's need to overcome the domain of the animal soon foreshadows his later

rebellion to establish equity with the white population. Like Behn and Lucretius, Oroonoko must address a civil war. After he is unable to argue himself out of bondage through discourse with the white slave owners, he is reduced to violent rebellion that is far outside the Lucretian model.

Lucretius charges Memmius to avoid involvement in combat. He urges him: “Lull to a timely rest, / O’er sea and land the savage works of war, / For thou alone hast power with public peace / To aid mortality” (Lucretius I.1210-1213). Lucretius’ advice is highly topical. Memmius was an elite Roman aristocrat who was implicated in an ongoing civil war. Other than this, he is a vague figure in Roman history, more noted for his fictionalized role in Roman philology than his political prowess. He was, however, a powerful Roman politician who profited from militarized conflict. Why Lucretius chooses him remains a mystery—other than perhaps to play the part of the unwilling participant.

Though Memmius functions within the text as a crucial example of one outside of the Lucretian ideal, he is only mentioned a handful of times in Books I, II, and V and remains entirely absent from the final Book VI. Lucretius draws the reader’s attention to some tension between the master and student after Memmius dismisses certain doctrines. Memmius is accused of falling asleep during Lucretius’ lessons of vacuity and atomism from the very start of the book, and in Book V, Lucretius appears to harbor resentment towards the student:

Memmius, first consider sea, earth and sky....

One day will see them all go, after so many years

And the whole mechanical giant will fall to pieces.

It does not escape me that this news will astonish you;

You will hardly credit that heaven and earth with vanish

And I shall find it hard to find the words to persuade you. (V.91-96)

Through this, Lucretius considers his teachings to be unsuccessful. Thus, there is a self-consciousness and a near loneliness to this passage. Though Lucretius' own philosophy is practiced in an insulated environment, Lucretian philosophy does not seem to be so easily practiced by men with responsibilities to or investment in larger society. W. R. Johnson sees this strained student-teacher dynamic as a means to explore issues in the practice of education: "Memmius is, at one level, a symbol of the difficulty of being instructed, and his failures remind us that listening is a difficult art" (Johnson 9). Yet, Lucretius seems to view Memmius, not as a tool to comment on the educational process but rather a figure who can bring Epicureanism to a larger populace with his vast sociopolitical influence. Memmius embodies, instead, Lucretius' failed Epicurean proselytizing.

Behn's account of Oroonoko is then similar to the portrait of Memmius in *De Rerum Natura*. Just as Memmius to some extent listens to Lucretius' teachings, Oroonoko observes the hypocrisies and incongruencies of Christian faith and practice as a student of Western civilization. In spite of his inferior status, he has the ability to captivate his white audience in a way that gains him prestige—until his questioning goes too far. Like Memmius, Oroonoko seems to reject Lucretian thought when it is not conducive to his real-life circumstances. Oroonoko is able to gain sociopolitical influence from a community in which he is otherwise excluded through his superhuman hunting of eels and tigers; in order to avoid a civil war, Oroonoko would have to accept his bondage. Epicureanism is thus incompatible with Oroonoko's circumstances, just as they are with

Memmius'. The two men's choice to exit the Lucretian model—as Memmius does with his disappearance from Book VI and Oroonoko does with his second act rebellion—represents the failures of the socially involved Epicurean.

Through the fictional vehicle of *Oroonoko*, Behn speculates about freethought in a rich and imaginative way. In bringing a male skeptic to her narrator's garden, she recreates the Epicurean-Lucretian traditional discourse and makes herself the administrator of it. In fictionalizing Christian hypocritical actions, she legitimizes her anti-religious sentiments which are enunciated by the character of the racial other. In placing a Lucretian figure in situations of war, bondage, and betrayal, she juxtaposes ideology and reality. Oroonoko's (and perhaps by extension Memmius') failure to truly embody the Epicurean ideal does not, as Behn sees it, refute their status as philosophers. Through their questioning of Lucretian essentialism, they provide another form of intellectual skepticism. Behn does not fall into absolutes such as liberalism/conservatism, atheism/theism, etc. but rather celebrates the diversity of thought brought forth from discourse. Though she celebrates Lucretian atomism, what she seems most commendatory of is Lucretian skepticism—that is an openness to questioning such absolutes. Oroonoko's dual role as both challenger to and champion of Epicureanism gives Behn the opportunity to also challenge and champion.

Biblical Accommodation and Spiritual Doubt in *Essay on Translated Prose*

Behn's interest in the Epicurean continues with her translation of Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralite des mondes (Discovery of New Worlds)*. Published in France in

1686, Fontenelle's treatise on the possibility of many worlds, particularly one on the moon, is reflective of the Epicurean principle of an infinite universe. Behn certainly was preoccupied with Epicurus at the time: she published this translation in 1688—the same year that she wrote *Oroonoko*.³¹ Though the text she translates is centered on a defense of the existence of multiple inhabited worlds, Behn's preface, "Essay on Translated Prose", largely responds in support of Fontenelle's secondary argument for Copernican systems of the universe.

While Behn and Fontenelle do not directly reference the Epicurean tradition in their texts, Fontenelle's discussion of plural inhabitable worlds and this discussion's location in a garden certainly bring to mind the Epicurean. As Behn relies upon the gender-inclusivity of the Epicurean garden in her work with the pastoral intellectual community in both *Oroonoko* and "To the Unknown Daphnis", Fontenelle's *A Discovery of New Worlds* places a woman at the center of his garden discourses. At the beginning of "The Third Night", Fontenelle (translated by Behn) writes, "We [The Lady Marquiese and I] did not fail to go that Evening into the Park, which was now become a place consecrated to our Philosophical Entertainment" (Fontenelle 125). Behn, in fact, lists the inclusion of Lady Marquiese "as one of the speakers in these five discourses" as "Motive...for [her] to undertake this little work" ("Essay" 73). Perhaps Behn's growing intellectual interest in the Epicurean garden and women inside such a community contributed to the quick turn-around from Fontenelle's original publication to Behn's

³¹ Behn also published in 1688 a translation of another work by Fontenelle, his *l'Histoire des Oracles* (*The History of Oracles*). Both *History of Oracles* and *Discovery of New Worlds* would prove to be faithful translations, except that Behn would often correct certain errors made in Fontenelle's text.

English edition. Moreover, Behn's inclusion of the complex and topical "Essay on Translated Prose" suggests that she, inspired by Lady Marquiese's philosophical inquiry, was willing to enter the garden not as a fictionalized character, but as herself.

Behn as a Critical Reader

Certainly, Behn's decision to promulgate her own philosophy in the text is rather radical. Scholars such as Elizabeth Scott-Baumann argue that women in the sixteenth and seventeenth century entered a larger philosophical context through the reading of their male counterparts' work. For instance, Scott-Baumann in her book *Forms of Engagement: Women, Poetry and Culture, 1640-1680* hypothesizes that women writers like Hutchinson, Cavendish, and Philips "used their own reading to engage with their readers. By alluding to Donne or invoking contemporary philosophy, they initiate a dialogue with their readers about current and historical literary culture" (Scott-Baumann 15). However, the book does not include a thorough study of Behn's writings on theological and philosophical controversy of the seventeenth century. Indeed, Behn does not seem to follow exactly the model of readership that Scott-Baumann suggests is true for other Restoration female writers. Though Behn is an astute reader and advertises her own thoughts in reference to her fellow writers, her engagement with others' texts is not just an attempt to gain clout. Behn clearly saw her role as a reader as that of a close critic. This dialogue is not just to enter into the conversation, but to shift it.

Behn, as translator, views herself as the text's most intimate reader and analyst. Though she appreciates *A Discovery of New Worlds* enough to make it accessible to the English philosophical community, she does so with one crucial caveat: even she as

translator criticizes the text in her prefatory material. Behn lists her grievances of Fontenelle's book, which include his treatment of the Lady Marquiese's intelligence, his apathy towards theological modes of thinking, and, as she sees it, the occasionally unfounded radicalness of his arguments. However, Fontenelle is only one of many of Behn's colleagues who are closely examined in "Essay on Translated Prose". Indeed, scholar Line Cottegnies captures the literary critical importance of Behn's translation and of this essay. She agrees that Behn's preface was not just a reading of Fontenelle but "a new, exciting philosophical contribution to the debate about Copernicanism, refuting Father Tacquet and others" (Cottegnies 24). Even more strikingly, she declares it "the earliest theoretical text on prose translation in English" (24). Thus, Behn's essay is not just a close literary study of the content of her colleagues but also of the form and practice of translation.

Of course, just because the text broke ground on prose translational theory does not mean it existed in isolation—even this essay was in response to Behn's reading of another text: "An Essay on Translated Verse" by the Earl of Roscommon (1630-1685).³² The latter text was printed in 1684 by the same publisher as Behn, Jacob Tonson. Behn proves herself unafraid to critique writers under the same publisher—she will be shown to do this again with her satire of Thomas Creech. In his essay, Roscommon praises French translations but stresses the importance and even need for the English to gain ground on this process. He is rather insistent on British elitism in this genre. Sixteen

³² The Earl of Roscommon (also known as Wentworth Dillon) was a notable writer and thinker of the seventeenth century. His "Essay on Translated Verse" was recommended by John Dryden, who wrote the foreword to the piece shortly before its publication. Roscommon was a celebrated Latin translator, most notably for his translation of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, which he published in 1680.

years earlier, John Dryden had penned a similar praise of poetry translated into English in his *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* (1668). Conversations around issues of translation become ubiquitous in writings throughout the Restoration period. Janet Todd suggests in her preface to Behn's "Essay on Translated Prose" that this flourish of essays indicates that translation "was...controversial in its practice and in its results", given the intense and fluctuating sociopolitical and religious climate of the second half of the seventeenth century ("Textual Introduction" viii).

A frequent verse translator herself, Behn had the resume to deem verse or prose the harder of the two; however, she chooses to focus on which of the languages are the hardest to translate whether it be in prose or verse. She discusses in depth the difficulty of translating French instead of Latin—an exercise that she, not Roscommon, undertook. In drawing the readers' attention to a practice in which she has proven herself more adept than Roscommon, Behn establishes a level of authority over her counterpart.³³ Where he surmounts her in Latin, she surmounts him in French. To Behn, her translations are much more challenging than his. Indeed, the first argument Behn makes in her essay is not that prose is more difficult to translate but that the "French therefore is of all the hardest to translate into English" (74). Her argument is primarily based on what appears to be a deep linguistic study into the origins of the different Western languages. This study

³³ As mentioned before, Behn's poem, "To the Unknown Daphnis on His Excellent Translation of Lucretius", stresses the author's frustration with her limited access to Latin. She openly did not know the language. That she celebrates and asserts a level of difficulty in her understanding of French above that of Latin places her skill as a translator as equal to that of her male contemporaries. Moreover, Behn seems to suggest that her translations of French works are not just more difficult for the language disparities, but that, unlike many Latin texts, there was no English predecessor on which to base her translation in the first place.

concludes not the superiority of the English language, as Roscommon's does. Instead, Behn offers a critique of the English *and* French languages, particularly in their equal bastardization of Latin:

French Authors take a liberty to borrow whatever Word they want from the Latin without farther Ceremony, especially when they treat of Sciences. This the English do not do, but at second hand from the French. It is Modish to Ape the French in everything: Therefore, we not only naturalize their words, but words they steal from other Languages. I wish in this and several other things, we had a little more of the Italian and Spanish humour. (75)

In structuring her opening argument (and in titling her essay in a similar manner to Roscommon), she enters the conversation he opened in 1684. As such, she asserts her skill in translating French prose, rejects that English language as superior to others, and, by implication, quickly critiques her counterpart.

Behn achieves something similar in her criticism of the material within her own translation; however, she rebukes aspects of Fontenelle's text more openly than in her treatment of Roscommon. Though she calls Fontenelle an "ingenious French author", she still finds several flaws in *A Discovery of New Worlds* ("Essay" 76). Not only is Behn disgruntled by Fontenelle's characterization of Lady Marquiese as "silly", she is also dissatisfied with his theological and scientific rationale (76). On his argument that there must be many worlds, she writes, "[H]e hath pushed his wild Notion of Plurality of Worlds to that heighth of Extravagancy, that he most certainly will confound these Readers, who have not Judgment and Wit to distinguish between what is truly solid...

and what is trifling and airy” (77).³⁴ She even states later that in her own analysis of the text, she will “not presume to defend his Opinion, but one may make a very good use of many things he hath expressed” (77). Even though this reflects a more conservative side to Behn’s thinking, it still demonstrates her respect and consideration of the full spectrum of liberal and conservative ideologies, while still examining all such theories with a skeptical eye.

Ironically, much of her skepticism towards Fontenelle is in relation to his exclusion of the divine from his text. Though much of her work (particularly in that of *Oroonoko* and “To the Unknown Daphnis”) supports reasoning without intrusion of religious principles, Behn changes her tone in this essay. She appraises that Fontenelle “ascribes all to Nature, and says not a Word of God Almighty, from the Beginning to the End; so that one would almost take him to be a Pagan” (“Essay” 77). In the wake of texts such as *Oroonoko* and *Abdelazer*, Behn’s claim that the absence of God in Fontenelle’s reasoning makes him “almost” an atheist or pagan seems rather contradictory. While *Oroonoko* and *Abdelazer* are accused of heresy, she defends Fontenelle’s faith if only to defend her own in the process. She writes that despite the absence of a divine figure in his text, “he gives a magnificent Idea of the vastness of the Universe, and of the almighty and infinite Power of the Creator, to be comprehended by the meanest Capacity” (77). Thus, Behn has carefully monitored her critique of Fontenelle. To translate a decidedly heterodox text would place her in the position that Lucy Hutchinson found herself in

³⁴ One of the most criticized aspects of the text was Fontenelle’s assertion that “one day Men will be able to fly to the Moon”, as it was seen as sacrilegious to suggest that humans could leave earth (Fontenelle 123). Perhaps this is one of the “airy” or “trifling” aspects of Fontenelle’s text that Behn referenced. This idea is echoed by Wadham College alumna, John Wilkins, in his discourses on the moon.

during the 1650s and Creech during the 1680s upon translating Lucretius. Behn, Hutchinson, and Creech feel the need to justify their translation of radical text. “Essay on Translated Prose” at once distances Behn from the content of the source material while also suggesting that the original author is not as spiritually harmful as he may seem.

Behn, thus, does not translate Fontenelle for his personal defense of the existence multiple worlds, but for the questions he raises about systems of the universes in doing so. She seems thrilled that scientific principles are being discussed outside of Latin, that a woman is included in the conversation, and that Fontenelle carries high prestige as an author internationally (73). Just as with Creech, Behn celebrates that the author has opened the dialogue to those that cannot read Latin, but she also recognizes that close intellectual relationships with philosophers of high merit provides her with the clout to access to the English free-thinking community.³⁵ However, of utmost concern to Behn is how his line of reasoning leads to a brief defense of a pro-Copernican system.

Behn’s support of Copernicanism is largely concerned with countering the Biblical argument against heliocentrism. Just as she seems worried about the apparent atheism of Fontenelle, so too does she defend herself against charges that her theories of Biblical accommodation and Copernican systems of the universe go too far. As her model of controversy, she cites Thomas Burnet:

I hope none will think my Undertaking too bold, in making so much use of the

³⁵ Fontenelle also recognizes the novelty of his introduction of such principles and ideas in the French language. In his own preface to the work, he opens comparing himself to Cicero “when he undertook to put Matters of Philosophy into Latin; which, till that time, had never been treated of, but in Greek” (Fontenelle 87).

Scripture, on such an Occasion. I have a Precedent, much esteemed by all ingenious Men;

that is, Mr. Burnet's Book of Paradise, and Antedeluvian World, which incroaches as

much, if not more, on the holy Scriptures. ("Essay" 85)

Burnet was a famously provocative free-thinker and Biblical accommodationist. His text to which Behn is referring, *Telluris theoria sacra* (*The Sacred Theory of the Earth*), was published in 1684 to much criticism. The central theme of his treatise presses upon major issues within the current intellectual climate—how does one reconcile the growing scientific discoveries of a soon-to-be Enlightenment Age with the literal reading of the Holy Scriptures?

Burnet's answer centers much on problems with the Biblical creation narrative. *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* argues principally that "the Earth arose from Chaos" and, rather than a literal understanding of the six-day creation story, that "the World had stood Six thousand years" during which it was being created (Burnet A2, 23). Burnet's central claim is not to denounce a "Creator" but to encourage an alternative reading of the Bible—one that allows the Scriptures to stand alongside the growing scientific discoveries of the day. Each creation "day", Burnet argues, was a thousand years. What would a thousand years matter to an eternal being? As for the "Chaos", God is the author of such Chaos from which the earth arose. Behn appears to revere, or at the very least be intimately familiar with, the text and its contemporary reception. As with Fontenelle's apparent heterodoxy, her understanding and opinion of Burnet is framed as an "almost". She is willing to entertain Burnet's philosophy, but she does not allow herself to go quite

that far. Thus, she critiques the discourse yet gives it space within her argument, all the while filling this essay with controversial statements of her own.

Biblical Accommodation and Galileo

Regardless of how she tries to distinguish herself, Burnet's argument resembles Behn's within "Essay on Translated Prose". Burnet's theory is a perfect example of the theological principle of Biblical accommodation. According to intellectual historian, Stephen Benin, Biblical accommodation is rooted in necessity: "Divine accommodation/condescension alleges, most simply, that divine revelation is adjusted to the disparate intellectual and spiritual level of humanity at different times in human history" (xiv). This simple theorem manifests itself in many complex ways, particularly in the seventeenth century. To use the test case of Burnet: because humans cannot comprehend true cosmic chaos nor the process of creation over thousands of years, the writer of the Torah, for narrative comprehension's sake, was divinely inspired to describe the creation process in a way that was accessible for human's inferior, fallen minds. This understanding of the creation story, again, does not detract from God as Creator nor from the belief that the earth was created with a plan, but it does assert that, because of human's inability to truly comprehend divine omnipotence, they receive a watered-down text. Thus, not all parts of the Bible can be taken literally.

While Benin traces the roots of accommodation through many early Christian, medieval, and early Renaissance texts (not limited to the Western canon), he notes an increased consideration of divine condescension in the era shortly before the

Enlightenment. Behn's text is closely connected to this style of theological thought. She practically provides her own definition of divine accommodation in "Essay on Translated Prose" and rewords this same idea multiple times throughout the text. She explicates, "the Spirit of God has been so condescending to our Weakness, that through the whole Bible, when any thing of that kind is mentioned, the Expressions are always turned to fit our Capacities, and to fit the common Acceptance, or Appearances of things to the Vulgar" ("Essay" 79). Behn's transition to Biblical translation follows an impressive strategy: by detailing how difficult it is to translate contemporary French and English, she enunciates how much more difficult the translation is from Hebrew and Greek to contemporary English, as well as the translation of ancient society's scientific, intellectual framework to the seventeenth century.

She is inspired to speak of these challenges because of a passing mention of Fontenelle's support of heliocentrism in *Discovery of New Worlds*. Before she allows herself to develop what will become a thorough inquiry into the nature of Biblical translation and the relationship between Scripture and science, Behn inserts a familiar disclaimer: "As to [systems of Copernicus], I cannot but take his part as far as a Woman's Reasoning can go. I shall not venture upon the Astronomical part, but leave that to the Mathematicians" ("Essay" 78). The disclaimer reads as almost humorous. In the same paragraph, Behn introduces an argument to prove her case for Biblical accommodation which is entirely centered on her ability to understand and detail geometric, chronological, and astronomical principles that are incompatible with a literal Scriptural reading.

When concluding her analysis of disparities between Scriptures concerning the length of King Solomon's reign, she boldly contradicts herself: "It is not my present Business to reconcile this difference; but I can easily do it; if any Body think it worth their Pains to quarrel with my Boldness, I am able to defend myself" (80). Behn not only reverses her previous shyness but presents her arguments as superior to her contesters. Her assertion of mathematical authority is supported by her intensely thorough dissection of the chronological, geometric, and astronomical fallacies in the Old Testament.

Her astronomical discussions, which are foundational to her Scriptural defense of Copernicanism, can be somewhat derivative of her contemporaries. However, the precedent for her geometric and chronological questioning remains more obscure. Her mathematical and chronological inquiries are primarily in regards to passages in I Kings that provide details of King Solomon's reign. For instance, in her example of geometrical inaccuracies, she refers to the construction details provided for the Temple of Solomon, particularly the "Dimensions of Solomon's Molten Brass in 1 King. 7.23" ("Essay" 79). 1 Kings 7:23 reads: "And he made a molten sea, ten cubits from the one brim to the other: it was round all about, and his height was five cubits: and a line of thirty cubits did compass it round about" (King James Version). To this, Behn replies in a fascinating display of research:

That is to say, the Diameter of this Vessel was a Third of its Circumference: This is

indeed commonly understood to be so, but is far from a Geometrical Exactness, and will

not hold to a Mathematical Demonstration, as to the just Proportion between the

Diameter and Circumference of a Circle. (79)

Somehow, Behn puts even more arithmetic effort towards her concern over inconsistencies in Solomon's length of reign.³⁶ This passage is a risky consideration of man-made error in the writing of the Bible. The Bible is not, to Behn, a flawless God-breathed text, but one that was written by humans for humans. With this reading of the Bible, Behn appears not afraid to study the Scriptures as a work of divine condescension nor critique the inherent fallacies within certain scientific or chronological claims.

Though he is the basis for her to launch into her own Biblical and scientific discoveries, Fontenelle's theories are rarely listed as her source material. Rather, Behn primarily develops her argument from principles set forth by Galileo and Jesuit mathematician, Andreas Tacquet, who was also a French astronomer like Fontenelle. Though Galileo is never directly mentioned, Behn's work almost undeniably draws inspiration from Galileo's famous 1615 treatise, "Letter to the Madame Christina of Lorraine Grand Duchess of Tuscany: Concerning the Use of Biblical Quotations in Matters of Science". Father Tacquet's work, by contrast, is the text that she wishes to challenge.

Her choice to draw attention to Tacquet's work is perhaps strategic. In an essay focused on disparities among translations of the Bible, it is best to respond to the author

³⁶ The passage, though fascinating, is too lengthy to detail in this essay; however, it critiques the inaccuracies of 1 Kings 6.1 which reads:

"And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel were come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Zif, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the Lord." (King James Version)

She analyzes this passage carefully with the number of years presented by Paul's sermon in Acts. The scriptural incompatibility is detailed thoroughly.

whose language you best understand, and surely Father Tacquet's French origins make him a topical example from which to pull in a preface to a French translation. Tacquet's *Opera Mathematica*, which Behn likely read in French, is a multivolume work originally published in Antwerp in 1669. In this text, Tacquet cites similar Scriptural passages that refute Galileo's and other's defense of the Scriptural validity of Copernicus' system of the universe. The Bible verses that Tacquet analyzes are the same that Behn cites, placing "Essay on Translated Prose" in direct conversation with *Opera Mathematica*. She outlines, "In the end of this Treatise, he cites several Texts of Scripture; and particularly, the 19th Psalm, And the Sun standing still at the Command of Joshua" ("Essay" 78). The very title page of her translation advertises her rebuttal to *Opera Mathematica* and to her other male contemporaries. The title page promotes "Essay on Translated Prose" as a work "wherein the Arguments of Father Tacquet, and others, against the System of Copernicus (as to the Motion of the Earth) are likewise considered, and answered" (Fontenelle 71). This essay is thus firmly steeped in Behn's role as a critical commentator not only on Copernican principles but also on systems of theological inquiry and Biblical interpretation.

Behn delivers as advertised—the formulation of her essay, as she states, is in direct conversation with Tacquet's Scriptural argument against Copernican theory. She begins her pro-heliocentric argument with a declarative position in opposition to Tacquet. Her aim is clear: "to make it appear that the two Texts cited by Father Tacquet...are at least as much for Copernicus and his System, as they are for Ptolemy's" ("Essay" 82). As will be explored further in this text, Behn's theory of Biblical accommodation and knowledge of astronomy and geometry aid her in dismantling his Scriptural argument.

However, as Scott-Baumann suggests about other women writers, Behn surrounds her argument with credible male sources that bolster her discursive potency and place her in close kinship with some of the great freethinkers.

Throughout “Essay on Translated Prose”, Behn develops a vast bibliography spanning over a thousand years. This essay has already established her intellectual conversation with Father Tacquet, the Earl of Roscommon, Thomas Burnet, and Fontenelle, but Behn’s text demonstrates her vast reading list. In describing the natural phenomenon of whirlwinds, she cites Rene Descartes in that he “understands [whirlwinds] in a more general sense, and I call it a Whirling” (76). In regards to church history she points to the Bishop of Venice, Anthony Godeau, who reaffirms Behn’s assessment of the issues in chronology during Solomon’s reign. She assures readers that her reference to him “doth not remove the Difficulty, so well as what I have said” (82).

She does not limit herself to contemporary thinkers, but also draws upon the first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, who was frequently referenced in relation to historical accuracies (or inaccuracies) in the Bible. She draws him to the forefront again to stress the problems with accounts of Solomon’s reign: “Josephus says expressly, in the third Chapter of his eighth Book of Antiquities, that King Solomon reigned eighty Years, and died at the Age of ninety four” (81). She recognizes, however, how problematic it is for a Scriptural scholar (as she so posits herself to be) to cite Josephus in contradiction to the Scriptures, clarifying, “I would not presume to name this famous Historian in contradiction to the Holy Scriptures, if it were not easie to prove by the Scriptures, that Solomon reigned almost twice forty years” (81).

Yet, perhaps her closest intellectual relationship is not with a writer whom she names. Behn shows the most sympathy towards an argument by Galileo found in his “Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina”, which was widely circulated at the time Behn was writing her essay. In this treatise, Galileo argues for a Copernican cosmic system in response to the same Scriptures later studied by Father Tacquet. His principal thesis was, like Behn, that the Bible is accommodated for inferior human understanding and that the minutiae of translation allow for human error in copying and distribution. The subjects of the Bible, without accommodation, would be “matters infinitely beyond the comprehension of the common people” (Galileo 182). He bemoans his opinion that religious authorities “would have us altogether abandon reason and the evidence of our senses in favor of some biblical passage, though under the surface meaning of its words this passage may contain a different sense” (179). However, such a complaint does not diminish the supremacy and infallibility of the salvation narrative. These words greatly resemble Behn rejection of the blind acceptance of orthodox Christianity in both her poem to Creech and *Oroonoko*. The Baconian notion that scientific reasoning was given to humanity to decipher as another “Scriptural text” (i.e. nature) is found in Galileo’s and Behn’s work. Defense of heliocentrism thus was a defense not only of the principle of the sun as the center of the universe but also of scientific reasoning outside the constraints of religious doctrine.

Similarly, Behn’s thesis, which manifests itself in a few mutated forms throughout the text, posits “that the design of the Bible was not to instruct Mankind in Astronomy, Geometry, or Chronology, but in the Law of God, to lead us to Eternal Life” (“Essay” 79). In a congruous manner, Galileo makes the claim “[t]hat the intention of the

Holy Ghost is to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how heaven goes” (Galileo 186). Though Behn’s study is centered on issues of literal readings of Scripture that hinder human scientific progress, Galileo primarily defends the Biblical soundness of his support of Copernicus’ theory.

Galileo wrote his treatise at a pivotal moment in his career—the astronomer’s mounting popularity accompanied mounting religious criticism. Galileo wrote his letter as a defense of his life in the wake of his vastly influential scientific texts; Behn wrote “Essay on Translated Prose” as an argument that her opinions should be influential on the freethinking community at all. These disparate contexts provide a framework that instigates a difference in approach: Behn discredits the extent of Biblical applicability much further than Galileo is willing in his letter. His is limited to astronomical matters; hers is a universal principle to be applied for nearly all readings of Scripture (excluding that of the Gospel salvation narrative).

Indeed, Behn’s tone is almost agitated when she stresses her accommodationist theory, particularly when speaking of Tacquet’s interpretation of Psalms 19. In this passage thought to be written by David, the writer celebrates the “glory of God” which has covered “all the earth” (Psalm 19: 1, 4, King James Version). David continues, “In [the ends of the earth] hath he set a tabernacle for the sun, / Which is a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race” (Ps. 19:4b-5, KJV). Father Tacquet argued in 1684 that this passage supports the Ptolemaic system in that the sun was situated for the earth. This tabernacle (or the sun), thus, emerges to “run” a race. In that, Tacquet and others claimed that David was insinuating the cosmological system in which the sun was set in motion to service the center of the universe—earth.

Behn associates this passage with Scriptural studies that are too detailed and literal of readings and, as such, are inadequate and ineffectual. She attacks Tacquet and others' literalist reading by asking a string of rhetorical questions: "That these words are Allegorical is most plain. Does not the Word *Set* impart stability, Fix'dness and Rest, as much as the Words *run his Race*, and *come forth of his Chamber*, do signifie motion or turning round?" ("Essay" 82). Behn's strategy with her argument is not to plant certainty for Copernicus but doubt in the argument for Ptolemy. Indeed, she concedes, "For the Words of Scriptures favour one Opinion as much as the other" (82). Her analysis of the Psalm is short, and yet Behn places it before her discussion of a longer, more complicated passage in Joshua. Because of this, Tacquet's argument is already in question before she arrives at Joshua's miracle.

The passage of primary concern for both Galileo and Behn in terms of Copernican theory is that of a miracle in the tenth chapter of the Old Testament book of Joshua. After Joshua has fought at Gilgal and won in Gibeon against Israel's enemies, the Amorites, he seeks to prove that his victory was evidence that God was on the side of the Israelites. To do so, Joshua issues a command to the cosmos:

Sun, stand thou upon still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon.

And

the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon

their enemies.... So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down

about a whole day. And there was no day like that before or after it, that the Lord

hearkened unto the voice of man: for the Lord fought for Israel. (Joshua 10:12b-14

King James Version)

Galileo's central argument around this passage centers upon theories of Biblical accommodation in a way that Behn's does not. This contrast is an ironic switch: the great scientist Galileo focuses primarily on a close textual reading, whereas Behn seeks to explain this miracle via her understanding of the systems of the moon and sun.³⁷

Just as Behn stresses that certain Biblical passages should be read as allegory, Galileo stresses that Joshua's miracle was actually an act of accommodation. Galileo suggests that the scientific principles that allowed Joseph to accomplish this phenomenon were not explained fully so that the Israelites could understand it on their own miraculous terms. Galileo paints Joseph as a rhetorical conduit between God and his people, explaining, "But since his words were to be heard by people who very likely knew nothing of any celestial motions beyond the great general movement from east to west, he stooped to their capacity and spoke according to their understanding" (Galileo 211). Perhaps Behn would have agreed with Galileo's take on the passage; she herself would claim later in "Essay on Translated Prose" that Christians should leave points of science "to the Opinion of the Learned" ("Essay" 85). However, Galileo places Joseph as the learned and the people as the followers—an interpretation which Behn does not necessarily reiterate.

³⁷ To be sure, this does not eliminate the fact that Behn implores accommodationist theory in a similar manner when citing the allegorical nature of the aforementioned passage from Psalm 19. However, her separation from this theory and venture into more of the translational and scientific defenses for the passage of Joshua indicates a concerted effort to position herself as a natural philosopher.

Instead, Behn takes another approach, in which Joseph is not as intellectually privy to the celestial changes. His agency is stripped from the translational practice, and rather, the feminized Moon takes control of the miracle. For Behn, the Moon is the acting principle and moves “nearer to the Body of the Sun, as to appearance, so it could not assist the Children of Israel with Light, having so little of her own: It was then...that the Moon stood still; and for some other Reason that it is taken notice of in Holy Scripture” (“Essay” 83). Behn connects this miracle to the Moon—which was frequently anthropomorphized to have a connection with women’s bodily systems—and completely strips the male author from authorial or celestial agency. Not only does this place the feminized Moon in the place of agency, but also establishes Behn as the modern-day teacher of this discovery.

Behn merges her scientific understandings with her other main concern—issues of translation. Much of her thesis on this passage in Joshua hinges on her own declared expertise in English translations of the Bible, particularly from Hebrew. Her assertion is sure and opens her argument for heliocentric affirmations in this miracle. She declares her preference for the “best Edition of the English Bible, which is printed in a small Folio by Buck, in Cambridge” (“Essay” 83). The edition she praises is a thoughtful reproduction of the original King James Bible, which was first printed in 1611. In response to those Puritans who disdained textual inexactitude in the original King James version, the Buck Bible was published in 1638. Just a cursory glance through the two editions demonstrates a much more concerted effort in the Buck edition to include thorough textual notes, many of which admit translational issues between the Hebrew or Greek original. Not only does the Buck Bible reference the parallels between pagan

Greek traditions and chronological enigmas, its prefatory material contains a detailed explanation of the issues with and historical processes of reproducing an ancient text in a non-ancient language.

In the very title page, the Buck Bible boasts that it is “[n]ewly translated out of the original tongues, and with former translations diligently compared and revised” (*The Holy Bible*). Because of the complicated history of Biblical translations, the Buck recognizes variants in meaning between different languages. This version celebrates the process of translation as an intellectual pursuit, stating that “there should be one more exact translation of the holy Scriptures into the English tongue” (ix). Thus, Behn’s attraction to this text is abundantly clear in the Buck Bible’s explanation of its translational process and its detailed marginalia. This edition is indeed so thorough that in his 2010 *Bible: The Story of the King James Version*, Gordon Campbell makes the same claim as Behn in 1688, when he cites “[t]he second Cambridge folio edition, printed in 1638” as “probably the best of the Bibles produced in the seventeenth century” (Campbell 116). In addition, Campbell notes that this text was one of the most popular and standard English editions of the Bible until the Oxford version emerged in the middle of the eighteenth century. Certainly, Behn, at the end of the seventeenth century, saw the Buck Bible as a reliable scholarly source.³⁸

³⁸ Behn is not only concerned with English translations of Scripture. She also works into this text references to the Greek Bible, called the Septuagint. This edition of the Bible included the Apocrypha, unlike the King James Version. The title of the Bible, Behn notes, was named because it was said to be compromised from “seventy two Interpreters” (“Essay” 81). She uses the Septuagint to prove her thesis about the inexactitudes of the Bible’s claim of the duration of Solomon’s reign.

That Behn asserts an opinion on the quality of translations of the Bible at all is fascinating when in conjunction with her theory of divine accommodation. Not only is she willing to critique the English version of the Bible, she is also willing to assert the authority to differentiate among the various English editions. However, she references the Buck Bible for the express purpose of establishing her authority over the translations of the Hebrew from this passage of Joshua. The basis for her first argument for the Copernican system rests upon the Buck's marginalia. In the Buck, she notes, there is included "an Asterism at the Word *stand*, and renders it in the Margent, from the Hebrew, *Be thou silent*: If it be so in the Hebrew, *be thou silent* makes as much for the Motion of the Earth, according to Copernicus, as for the Motion of the Sun according to Ptolemy" ("Essay" 83). In opening her argument by seeding doubt in the Biblical edition that both Tacquet and Galileo use, she continues to proclaim her authority in textual scholarship. This structural decision provides the prowess for her to demonstrate the very astronomical knowledge that she promises she will not employ in the opening passage.

Yet, Behn's discussion of the Buck text does not cease there. Though her reasoning is somewhat varied from Galileo, she arrives at a similar conclusion to her Copernican predecessor. Both Behn and Galileo decide that, in order for the cessation of the sun to have happened, a sort of change in cosmic time must have occurred. Under the heliocentric model, because the sun stands still, all planets move according the pull of the central sun. Galileo concludes, "Upon [the sun's] stopping all other revolutions ceased," and thus time itself stood still for a moment (Galileo 213). Unlike Galileo, Behn, in her conclusion, stresses the impetus of God in this occurrence. She declares, "I doubt not but when this stupendous Miracle was performed by the Almighty and Infinite Power of

God, his omnipotent Arm did in an instant stop the Course of Nature, and the whole Frame of the Universe was at a stand” (“Essay” 84). Behn’s invocation of God and reinstitution of the miraculous is perhaps a coverup for her larger argument, which indeed stresses the agency of Nature and not God in the course of this phenomenon.

In contrast, Galileo’s argument rests on the idea that either the sun would have had to stop entirely or the earth would have had to “accelerat[ed] the customary speed of the sun about three hundred sixty times” (213). This understanding forefronts a divine agent without necessarily naming one, and as such, Galileo does not subtract the power from Joshua as translator or God as miracle worker. Behn’s text questions the ways in which nature might have set the diurnal course in such a way that it caused a natural phenomenon. Indeed, Behn ends up concluding that this occurrence must have been like an “Eclipse of the Sun and Moon, which are now so regular, that an Astronomer could tell you to a Minute, what Eclipses will be for thousands of Years to come” (“Essay” 84). Behn stresses that it must have been a sight that was awe-inspiring to societies who did not have the technology nor scientific principles to understand what the event was. Thus, the miracle, Behn appears to imply, would have been a form of divine accommodation itself—a miracle designed for the minds of the early Israelites and not one that would impress an audience of seventeenth-century Europeans.

Much like Galileo’s, Behn’s analysis details the catastrophic effect such an astronomical shift would have upon the earth. Behn suggests that this event could not have been as miraculous as the Israelites perceived but rather a natural phenomenon. Behn’s argument deduces that “nothing less than two or three new Miracles, all as great as the first, could have set the World in Order again” (“Essay” 84). Behn’s conclusion

varies from Galileo's in regards to the geological and cosmological implications of such an event and suggests that she was not just comprehending Copernican theory from Galileo's letter secondhand but generating her own conclusions.

As a clearly contrasting bookend to her earlier assertions that she will not enter the discussion of mathematics and troublesome theology because of her inferior educational status as a woman, Behn claims a space for herself in the very realm she has promised to avoid. After her detailed and deeply concerted effort in the realm of geometry, translation, and astronomy, Behn concludes by expressing her opinion on the relationship between scientific discovery and Biblical understanding:

I think it is the Duty of all good Christians to acquiesce in the Opinion and Decrees of

the Church of Christ, in whom dwells the Spirit of God, which enlightens us to Matters of Religion and Faith; and as to other things contained in the Holy Scriptures relating to Astronomy, Geometry, Chronology, and other liberal Sciences, we leave those Points to the Opinion of the Learned. ("Essay" 85)

This claim is extraordinary in that Behn seems to have firmly placed her essay within the "Opinion of the Learned". To those that would oppose her, she shows herself ready to challenge, reconstitute, and belittle their arguments. In regards to her readings of the Scriptures, Behn concludes that others "keep close to the Literal Sense, and others give the Word of God only that Meaning or Sense that pleases their own Humours" (85). Indeed, she assures that nothing she has argued in the text has come from anything "but from good Authority", that being, largely, her own studies, readings, and mathematical observations (85). Thus, Behn creates in her "Essay on Translated Prose" a mechanism

by which she can promote herself as an excellent translator and subvert the low expectations of her mathematical and theological capacities. In this way, she acts as one in close conversation with the male thinkers of the seventeenth century in a manner that is both self-promoting and confidently articulated.

Self-Promotion and Satire in Behn's "A Letter to Mr. Creech"

Though Behn encourages an understanding of herself as a public intellectual, much of this self-fashioning is cast in a carefully feminized frame. Behn commends and deconstructs male contemporaries' arguments but rarely viscerally attacks them on the grounds of their own treatment of her work. Though less frequently than her male contemporaries, Behn proves herself highly capable of criticizing even the greatest authors of her time. Her scathing ridicule of John Dryden in her poem "A Satyr on Doctor Dryden" provides an example of Behn unfiltered. She bemoans his late-in-life conversion to Catholicism as a senile and anti-Christian act. She complains, "[A]las how leering Hereticks will laugh / to see a grey old hedge bird caught with chaffe / a lewd old Atheist some religion owne" ("A Satyr" 5-7). While her critique of Dryden is offered from the position of a distant observer, her disgruntlement towards Thomas Creech in "A Letter to the Mr. Creech" provides insight into her own frustration about intimate criticisms against her.

As already noted, Behn proved herself less than happy about the edits made to her poem praising Creech's translation of Lucretius. That she published her original version just two years later in her own poetry compilation and complained to Tonson, her

publisher, is evidence enough.³⁹ However, a year after Behn produced *Poems Upon Several Occassions* (1684), she edited a small book of poetry entitled *Miscellany* (1685). Included in this text is Behn's sendup of Thomas Creech, entitled "A Letter to Mr. Creech at Oxford, Written in the last great Frost". Rife with obscurely topical allusions, hyperbole, and jagged rhyme schemes, this poem is imbedded in the satirical tradition named after Samuel Butler's mock epic poem, *Hudibras*.⁴⁰ Behn's venture into this style of jabbing humor is a marked departure from her usually strict pentameter couplets. Behn does not shy away from the rough nature of Butler's infamous verse. Her tone is thus harsh and unpleasant, as when she sarcastically closes the poem prior to her postmark: "So Sir with Recommendents fervent, / I rest your very humble Servant" ("A Letter" 82-83).

This stylistic decision implies Behn's frustration with her constant portrayal as a bawdy playwright and with her exclusion from the realm of serious thinkers. However, the Hudibrastic style was not one that was necessarily considered unskilled. Particularly with the rise of irreverence in British texts in the aftermath of the Civil War, Butler's terse diction and unsatisfactory double rhymes were imitated frequently in the eighteenth century. Literary historian Richard Terry demonstrates that there was a highly contentious relationship among English poets on the value of this poetic form. Terry argues that *Hudibras*' "reputation was damaged by the near-relation in which it stood to

³⁹ Shortly after Creech's success with his translation of Lucretius, Behn would write to Jacob Tonson, her publisher, "As for Mr. Creech...never let him know my resentment" ("Letter to Tonson" 481).

⁴⁰ The original publication history of *Hudibras* spans from 1663-1684. Though parts of the epic poem were published sporadically from 1663-1678, the complete text was published finally in 1684. Perhaps, Behn was inspired by the cumulative text and responded to its continued popularity with her own venture into the style.

the English travesty” (Terry III). Travesty was the rising tradition of parodying classical texts, such as Cotton’s *Scarronides* and later Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*. Reception of these mock heroics varied wildly, but it was agreed that the style was a departure from the high-brow classics.

Crucially for Behn, the Hudibrastic style was a libertine vehicle for mocking something rather serious. Just as fellow male poets seriously critique conservative politics with *Hudibras* as a guide, Behn deftly wields this libertine tool to show the conservativeness of those within this intellectual community who exclude her. Creech’s edit of her poem is a trigger point to identify her broader exclusion from the community and also name the inherent hypocrisy in such a group. If Behn’s idea of a libertinism is that which seriously considers all types of thought, then their dismissal of her philosophical opinions unveils flaws within their own brand of thinking. Indeed, her tone is one of deep-seated anger. She tells Creech that in his treatment of her poem, “the disappointment was all mine” (“A Letter” 79). Thus, Behn’s choice of form functions in two crucial ways: Firstly, by writing in a style so divergent from her typical fare, she demonstrates the differences between traditionally “low-brow” satirical writing and her other poems. When she finally plays into critics’ stereotypes of her, she is able to reveal how such tropes are inaccurate. Secondly, the style offers Behn a chance to use a libertine tool to demonstrate inherent libertine flaws.

Though her style and tone are satirical, Behn rather seriously portrays her literary-intellectual resume. She demonstrates her vast influence through the poem’s journey through the streets of London. Behn moves about the city with her coach and coachman—an obvious exaggeration of her wealth as she had well-publicized financial

struggles particularly at the end of her life. Her connection to these places not only characterizes the vast amount of work that she did throughout her career, but also makes fun of those who critique her work no matter in what context she writes. Crucially, she begins at Jacob Tonson's publishing house where she has left a letter to Creech urging him to recall her other poem written for him. Though this poem is rarely referenced in discussions of "To the Unknown Daphnis", "A Letter to Mr. Creech" is fairly plain in connecting Behn's frustration as stemming from his editorial treatment of the Lucretian poem. She draws attention to it as her avatar in the poem metaphorically leaves this poem for him at his and her old publisher. She reminds him, "You shou'd have had a scrap of Nonsense / You may remember left at the Tonsons" ("A Letter" 4-5). She once again recalls his treatment of her text when she describes his "Scribling Fist was out of joynt / And ev'ry Limb made great complaint" (41-42). Her choice to set the opening of the poem at the Tonson's publishing house (a publisher that she left later in life due to financial limitations on her work) suggests a double source of betrayal. Tonson restricted her financially and allowed the mangled edition of her poem to be published allegedly without her knowledge, and Creech misrepresented her mode of freethought.

Indeed, Behn suggests that Creech's de-radicalization of her Epicurean viewpoints was rather demoralizing to her status as a public intellectual. She complains that his edits were "missing the dear Assignment, / [and] Gave [her] most cause of Tribulation" ("A Letter" 43-44). She goes on to suggest that she, had he been favorable to her text, would have introduced him to an influential Londoner—her late-in-life friend John Hoyle. Hoyle was a lawyer and close confidante to Behn during the 1680s, as she references him throughout much of her poetry (Todd 410). Hoyle qualifies to be a

colleague of Creech's because Behn describes him as "A great Admirer of Lucretius" ("Letter" 48). As such, Behn establishes her design for an intellectual network that never was fulfilled—a relationship between three Lucretian thinkers with Creech playing the part of a phony.

In these moments in which Behn names her exclusion, her mood rather dramatically swings from satirical to somber. Perhaps the most powerful instance of this tonal shift is when Behn mourns the intellectual community she felt was so elusive. She despairs:

But transitory hopes do vary,
And high Designments oft miscarry,
Ambition never climb'd so lofty,
But may descent too fair and softly. (49-52)

Indeed, Behn pauses her Hudibrastic voice numerous times to draw attention to the seriousness of her exclusion from the intellectual literary community. Many of her allusions in this text draw upon somber notions of segregations and comparisons between genders. In one such section, she parallels her wit to that of neoclassical poets and Dryden. She claims that she seeks wit that will "charm" and "instruct"—a famous sentiment echoed by Horace and Aristotle and frequently supported by poets such as Sir Phillip Sidney and Ben Jonson ("A Letter" 18-19). Furthermore, she claims that this moral center and "Wit, like Bays" are her "Tryal" (20-21). "Bays" was a common nickname for John Dryden during his career, in reference to the leaves that made up his laureate crown. That Behn draws attention to Jonson, Sidney, Dryden, and the ancient poets in this one section and then declares in frustration that reaching these masculine

standards “’twas most impossible” demonstrates Behn’s true exclusion from the realm of masculine esteem in the literary intellectual community (22). Moreover, her choice to not name these men but identify them by the standards and accolades that they received takes the agency from the poets themselves and places it onto those that seek to canonize such standards and writers. Thus, Behn insinuates that it is not for lack of skill that she cannot achieve the rank of these men, but for lack of proper recognition from the literary community at large.

This theme is further emphasized by Behn’s literary allusions. She makes a farce of her connection to Creech by mockingly calling both this poem and her commendatory poem of his Lucretius translation a “*Billet Deux*”, an intentionally butchered spelling, as Janet Todd notes, of the French term for a love letter (Todd 409). Furthermore, as she journeys, she passes “that Place of Fame call’d Temple” (“Letter” 36). This reference most clearly alludes to the judiciary buildings of the law school in London (called the Inns of Court), where many famous wealthy men studied law while developing specific styles of poetry that were often popularized and lauded by the literary community.

However, Behn could also be speaking of the Chaucer poem “The House of Fame”. In this dream poem, the poet explores a temple in which an eagle operates as a guide for meditation on why certain writers are famous and on what constitutes fame. Behn, if not referencing this directly, is certainly working with similar concepts, specifically as they relate to why she as a poet is excluded from the same fame and recognition as that of her peers.⁴¹ Thus, this allusion works on multiple levels. The Inns

⁴¹ As Behn’s work indicates, she was closely attune to many of the rising literary and philosophical trends to follow shortly after her time. Such contemplations of the nature of fame would become greatly popularized in the eighteenth century. For example, Pope

of Court was a breeding ground for respected intellectuals and poets and, as such, a breeding ground for fame. The nature of fame in the intellectual community is thus bound up in contemplations of prejudice, as in Chaucer's text. Behn's melding together of these two concepts suggests that she understands the nature of fame as British intellectual circles would have it. English literary fame is concerned not with skill but with gender, class, and social connections.

Indeed, the Inns of Court loom over Behn's failure to enter the dynamic philosophical conversations of the day. Creech's attendance in another exclusively male institution, Wadham College, provides a personally painful foundation for her to explain such groups. The educational system once so greatly lauded by her in "To the Unknown Daphnis" transforms into the object of her scorn, as she describes the university as "Where Colledg dunce is cur'd of Simple, / Against that Sign of Whore call'd Scarlet" ("Letter" 38-39). Once again, Behn's double entendre preys upon the spoiled nature teenagers entering the universities and the Inns of Court. The "Sign of Whore" was both in reference to the name of a tavern in London and potentially the "sign" of venereal diseases. Creech's stiffness in regards to his interpretation of Behn's Lucretian poem is weighed against this image of the partying college student. She is clearly angered by the hypocrisy. Creech's betrayal is portrayed beyond the ignorance of a "Colledg Dunce" but compared to the Whig faction that rebelled against the monarchy. Her association with those "cheated" by the "sawcy Whigg[s]" closely represents Behn's own exclusion from Creech's freethinking circle (64, 55). She follows her ultimate symbol of betrayal with

reworked Chaucer's "The House of Fame" to "The Temple of Fame" in 1715, and Thomas Gray's vastly canonized "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard" would articulate these same emotions even more clearly in 1750.

her explication of his treatment towards her: “Thus you by fate (to me, Sinister), / At Shop of Book my Billet mist Sir” (71-72). Thus, she demands his recognition of his mistreatment of her public persona and personal profitability.

She further characterizes Creech’s betrayal of her work by comparing his editorial intervention to that of Lazarillo de Tormes. She writes of someone looking at her as though she appears like “Lazarello who was show’d / For a strange Fish, to’t’h’ gaping Crowd” (“Letter” 69-70). *Lazarillo de Tormes* was a famous Spanish picaresque novel written by an anonymous source in the mid-sixteenth century. The story was wildly popular and rewritten as a sequel by Juan Luna in the 1620s. In Luna’s version of the second act of the story, Lazarillo is captured by seamen and is thought to be a sea monster. As such, the seamen decide to make profit off him as a showcase. In the original, Lazarillo is truly a fish, but in Luna’s later edition, Lazarillo, once discovered by the seamen to be a real man, is dressed to look like a fish and still placed in a cage. That Behn connects to Lazarillo, the man dressed up as a spectacle despite his true nature, demonstrates Behn’s hostility towards her critical treatment. Just as Creech presents her work on Lucretius as something other than her version of Epicureanism, her critics publicize her as something other than she intended. It is when she returns home that she refers to the fish. As she turns inward and out of the public eye, she makes an interesting observation: that she has not seen “Daphnis ere he went” because she is “sure his grief is beyond expressing” for what he did to her (“Letter” 75). The moment is striking in that it serves as a call to action for Creech. Even though Behn has rhetorically stripped him down, she still seeks both his apology and his invitation into his intellectual circle.

Behn's postscript, however, suggests that she does not expect Creech to follow through on the offer. She turns again to her comedic and witty side to point to other notable intellectuals with whom she wishes to converse. She recalls a party during which she met his friend "a Man of Wit / A man whom I shall ne're forget" ("Letter" 86-87). Behn attempts to make Creech intellectually jealous by showcasing her interest in another male philosopher. She goes over and beyond necessary compliments for the man and even begs Creech to introduce them, as though bragging that she still has interest from others to join their intellectual networks. She praises this man as she calls him:

True Tory all! and when he spoke,

A God in Wit, tho Man in look.

--To this your Friend—Daphnis address

The humblest of my Services;

Tell him how much—yet do not too,

My vast esteem no words can shew;

Tell him—that he is worthy—you. (90-96)

Her repartee in this section is clear. In this moment, she establishes a sense not only that she does not need Creech's approval to enter the intellectual conversation but also that she will move upward by her introduction to the anonymous man. Her refusal to name the man translates romantic and sexual tropes onto the realm of intellectual stimulation. Behn's keen insight into her own public persona as a romantic and sexual libertine allows her to play with the same themes of courtship, jealousy, and cheating. This framework is transplanted onto that which she seems much more interested in discussing—intellectual collateral and connections in the British philosophical community.

Thus, Behn's attempts at establishing an intellectual literary network are closely intertwined thematically with Behn's mockery of typical criticisms of her work. The only other text that perhaps more directly addresses her gendered criticism is in her preface to her play *The Luckey Chance*. In that work, she decries those that would say that her work is too bawdy. Indeed, the same such jokes and scenes "are never taken Notice of, because a Man writ them, and they may hear that from them they blush at from a Woman" (*Luckey Chance*). As she notes, critics, due to her status as a female professional writer, conflated her gendered identity with the bold content of her work. Unlike in *The Luckey Chance*, her satire of Creech plays into such stereotypes:

But you may think I was in Wine then;

Because it being cold, you know

We warm'd it with a Glass—or so,...

But when 'twixt every sparkling Cup,

I so much brisker Wit took up;

Wit, able to inspire a thinking. ("A Letter" 9-11, 14-16)

Instances of such ironic self-deprecation are flooded throughout the text. She even calls her rhymes "scurvy" (6).

Importantly, she sets her drunken writing within the context of the "last great Frost". The Great Frost is in reference to the 1683-1684 freeze of the Thames River. During winters in which the Thames would freeze (this occurred and was celebrated several times throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century), there would be a sort of city-wide party in the form of a fair that was set up in and around the iced-over Thames. As reputations of English fairs in the sixteenth and seventeenth century go, such events

were often marked by lewdness, drunkenness, and sexual debauchery.⁴² Behn, perhaps, is mocking her sexual and bombastic reputation by pointedly observing the time frame in and event during which she wrote. The fair, she seems to suggest, is to blame for her rather crude poem. She recalls the caricatures drawn of herself that would suggest that she is the type of woman who would enjoy the fair—as bawdy, rude, and drunken.

Though Behn's poem is one marked with humor, there is also a deep interplay between audience expectation and her own personal projection of self. Because of this dichotomy, "A Letter to Mr. Creech" is one of her most haunting poems. There is a sense, as she tours through London later in her life, that she cannot escape her reputation nor enter the conversations she wishes. Creech's treatment of her foray into the libertine is perhaps the most palpable example of such a shunning and thus produces the most palpable response. Even when Behn passes by Whitehall, she stresses her lack of payment and her submissive position to write for pay. She characterizes her old relationship with Charles II, who has recently died, as one of debt for propaganda: "His Sacred Majesty from Dunning; / Who oft in Debt is, truth to tell, / For Tory Farce, or Doggerell" ("A Letter" 27-29). A woman famously known for her lack of biography, Behn provides a poem that is overlooked in scholarly attempts to understand how she viewed herself in the larger seventeenth-century intellectual and literary circles. Though her preface to *The Luckey Chance* is often cited for her plea for her audience to enjoy her play as they would a man's, "A Letter to Mr. Creech" suggests a much more personal interaction of exclusion and prejudice—one that is not centered on audience perception

⁴² The most famous literary exploration of such events occurs in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew's Fair* in which he portrays moral depravity and hypersexuality of women throughout the course of the fair.

but peer perception. Her passage through male-dominated spaces of publishing, court life, collegiate campuses, and political strife emphasizes Behn as a close observer of but also a distant engager with the most crucial aspects of intellectual production in England.

Conclusion

Behn rightly perceived her distance from such freethinking spaces; however, this does not mean that Behn herself was not, by her prolific career later in life, infiltrating the intellectual discussions of the 1680s and onward. Whether welcomed or not, Behn made herself a writer with whom her contemporaries and later critics must deal and study. From Creech's hesitant insistence on employing Behn's praise of his translation to Collins' serious inclusion of Behn as a libertine in his *Discourse of Freethinking*, she was regarded by her contemporaries as someone to be discussed. Her own invasions of the intellectual world in "Essay on Translated Prose" and *Oroonoko* were made impossible to ignore by their sheer novelty—of *Oroonoko* as one of the first English novellas and of "Essay on Translated Prose" as one of the first serious inquiries on the nature of English translational prose. Her writing demanded attention. Whether she was respected or not, she was someone that was in fact heard. Traces of her are hard to escape throughout eighteenth century literary histories or even in the work and correspondences of writers like Dryden, Rochester, Creech, and so forth.

Certainly, Behn was noticed because she was one of the female exceptions. She was exceptional in that she supported herself by her pen, and she was exceptional in that, while often permitting herself to fall into the literary tropes of women writing, she demanded equal attention, respect, and pay. Ever since Virginia Woolf asked all women

who wrote to thank Aphra Behn for their right to do so, scholars have never been able to disentangle Behn's literary center from her gender (*A Room of One's Own* 48). This is not to say that Behn should not be read as a woman—that she was a woman writer cannot be omitted from an analysis of a writer constantly reminded that she was the other and thus unwelcome.

However, much of what Behn says in regards to sex is to wish away the centrality of her gendered identity so that she can be heard for what she truly wants to speak about. Gender is the rhetorical hurdle she must jump over before she gets to the heart of her discussion. In all four of these texts studied, Behn's engagement with her sex is so that she can get past it—so that she can enter the realm of libertinism that engages with many worlds theory, Biblical accommodationist theory, Copernican theory, Lucretian and Epicurean thought, and, above all, rational religious doubt. To study Behn as a forerunner for women's writing allowed the writer to emerge into the evolving seventeenth century literary canon; to read Behn as a woman is a necessary step to remove the veil by which she shrouded all her works. To only highlight Behn as a sexual and gendered libertine, however, would be to limit her to the same literary historical reading that her contemporaries and critics gave her up to the present day.

What was Behn trying to say that her gendered public perception and persona would not permit her? As has been demonstrated throughout this essay, Aphra Behn's work was deeply imbedded within a larger, highly masculinized discussion of fluctuating freethought. To successfully infiltrate these discourses required an understanding of Biblical history, church oppression, shifting scientific principles, and the conversation swirling around such issues in her day. As *Oroonoko*, "To the Unknown Daphnis, "A

Letter to Mr. Creech”, and “An Essay on Translated Prose” all demonstrate, Behn was an active and crucial participant in such discussions. Hopefully, she will be considered as such as further criticism develops around this important literary and intellectual figure.

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