RELIGION IN APHRA BEHN'S WORKS:
REPRESENTATION AND MISREPRESENTATION

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When Swinburne wrote almost a century ago: "Misrepresentation has been the lot of the virtuous Aphra", he was making a forcible plea for a reappraisal of the first professional woman-writer whose works were castigated by Victorian criticism. By stressing the error made by his contemporaries in passing biased judgements on Aphra Behn, he was also adumbrating in a way James Sutherland's less prepossessed observation on the difficulty for a reader: "to define the spirit of an age that produced such diverse writres as Bunyan and Etheredge, ..."; the English scholar attempted to throw some light upon the age of Dryden by underlining its "many voices" and "irreconcilable diversity of thought and expression".

The multifarious aspects of the productions of the Restoration may preclude any categorization and labelling. Even so, it is possible to find some revealing marks among the various manifestations of any writer in any period. The difficulty mentioned above, however, remains and is twofold since representation is liable to be warped into misrepresentation at two stages, first when reality is described by the writer and secondly when the description of reality is interpreted by a reader bent on learning about both the period and the writer.

In the case of Aphra Behn, the difficulty is increased by two obvious factors: as a woman she had to survive in a maledominated society; and the volume and the range of her production which, together with her long period of oblivion and the perduring diffi-

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dence towards her works, gave rise to a research seemingly limited to specific aspects of her accomplishments in various fields. The introduction to a recent article echoes this ill fortune that has accompanied to some extent Aphra Behn’s works ever since their publications:

Aphra Behn is still a neglected writer, and even among those critics who have given her work more than a passing acknowledgement there is a striking lack of consensus about the nature and the extent of her achievement, especially in her fiction.¹

Her thought and its development are indeed baffling because of their apparent meandering, more precisely in religious matters, although factual information may be gleaned from the incomplete edition of her works by Montague Summers, not to mention biographies, reissues and a comprehensive bibliography.² Original works whose forthcoming republication will help current research,³ together with the French works she chose for her translations also provide clues to the unravelling of the ambiguities of her political and religious allegiances.⁴

The intricacies that were the hallmark of the religious conflicts during Aphra Behn’s formative years should also be stressed; they raise an issue whose analysis leads to a somewhat similar approach

³ Janet Todd’s reedition of The Works of Aphra Behn will be a landmark in the reassessment of the influence and importance of Astrea in English literature. Aphra Behn’s translations of La Rochefoucauld’s Maximes and Fontenelle’s Histoire des Orales and Entretiens sur la Pluralité des Mondes will appear in the forthcoming bilingual collection I am launching to reedit the first translations of outstanding European works.

to that already expressed in the introduction to this paper: "Seventeenth-century religious convictions and their organized proponents display the delightful characteristic of defying the historian's attempt at categorization." Besides, unlike contemporaries such as Bunyan or William Penn whose interest lay first and foremost in expounding "the ways of God to men", Aphra Behn's polygraphy makes it difficult to draw a clearcut sketch of her views on religion.

However, a number of certainties relating to her background and the events that left a mark upon her mind will help define her consciousness of the world she lived in. Two other elements must also be taken into account: first the economic independence she managed to obtain through her professionalism, and which gave a slant to her views on a world dominated by men, a world she belonged to and accepted but observed from a standpoint enabling her womanhood to vent her attacks and ur-feminist claims; secondly, her travel to and stay in Surinam where she was in contact with three worlds, with three different approaches to relations between power and submission, which made her realize what relativity and proportion meant. In her writings, there are also mentions of contemporary figures, some of them linked with plots in which religion and politics intermingled into one single issue; these mentions accompanied by allusions, passing comments or extensive judgements are landmarks showing the evolution of her religious beliefs in which a variety of traditions and influences can be traced.

Aphra Behn's life began during one of the most perturbed and violent period in English history. A king was beheaded for the first time in Europe, his father-image debunked. This sent tremors of fear through adjoining France. The Sun-king and his divine right were currently being questioned by the Fronde which spread through France, as far as Bordeaux, where it assumed Republican and Protestant hues and looked like a repeat of the religious rebellions in France crushed in the preceding century. An echo of the rising led by Condé, after being announced in The Argument, reverberates throughout the Love Letters: "In the time of the rebellion of the true Protestant Huguenots in Paris, under the conduct of the

Prince of Condé...”\(^1\) Aphra Behn then adds: “Still the League went forward, and all things were ready for a war in Paris... the Huguenots were defeated, and the King got the day, and every rebel lay at the mercy of his sovereign.”\(^2\)

Unwittingly or not, Aphra Behn is mixing two sources. On the one hand, she refers certainly to the “Grand Condé” and the Fronde: the hero-figure who died in 1685 had led the “Princes” against Cardinal Mazarin with a period in Bordeaux where, in 1651, the radical rebels of the Ormée attempted to set up a Republic and make an alliance with Cromwell. Monmouth’s career, less glorious, bore some resemblance to that of Louis II de Bourbon Condé.\(^3\)

Although the events that took place in France and the characters that were involved in them were no doubt vivid memories in England, Aphra Behn may have heard recollections of them from William Scot, her contact in Antwerp, in her spying days. The latter’s father, Thomas Scot, was “the head of the Commonwealth Intelligence Service” to whom “Colonel Sexby... reported from Bordeaux his base... for two years [1651-53] twice a week.”\(^4\). On the other hand, the Huguenots’ persecution during the wars of religions during the preceding century and the figure of their leader, Louis de Bourbon, grandfather to the “Grand Condé” were also present in the minds of Aphra Behn and her contemporaries; indeed these Protestant rebels may have given an example for the “Good Old Cause” by setting up Republics in a number of French cities.\(^5\).

The life of Louis de Bourbon, his love affairs and his death at Jarnac in 1569 were the topics of *The Prince of Condé made English*, a book published in London in 1675. Dryden, drawing his subject from the same period, wrote *The Duke of Guise* in 1683. The keys to the *Love Letters*, the first piece of fiction by Aphra Behn, (where facts are so diverse and mystifying that one may

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resort to describing it as not only a piece of "faction" but a piece of "mystification") are indeed manifold and central to a deciphering of the writer's imagination and creation.

If 1640 is accepted as the year when she was born, Aphra Behn was nine when Charles I was executed. Her attitude to the Regicide and the impact the event had on her are summed up in the allusion to the latter in Oroonoko where the Royal Slave, one of the numerous personae voicing Aphra Behn's views, "had heard of the late civil wars in England, and the deplorable death of our great monarch; and wou'd discourse of it with all the sense and abhorrence of the injustice imaginable." This period of strife and warring tensions left her with a lasting aversion to any form of violence based on fanaticism and aimed at individuals or the established order. It also instilled into her a hankering after a return to a pastoral and peaceful period when Cavaliers could be likened to shepherds dallying with their shepherdesses in Arcadian fields. In the same vein the myth of the Golden Age and the wish to recapture the prelapsarian state of innocence meant to her an end to factions and their contentions.

While external elements such as the events mentioned above shaped Aphra Behn's consciousness without her intervention, her status, whatever her origin, also forced her into traditional moulds of education and upbringing of contemporary young girls, with all the shortcomings and disadvantages these moulds implied and against which she inveighed in various passages of her writings. Running counter to the traditional framework of her status and setting her apart from the rest of the "Fair Sex" is the economic independence she achieved and through which she entered an incipient market economy where she became first a playwright and a poet, then a translator and a storyteller paving the way for future novelists. Consequently she depended on demand, i.e. on her public, who influenced her production and provided her with a living. This may account for some of her wavering, sometimes construed as recanting. However limited her independence was, it gave her the liberty to expound her views against the marriages and the convent girls were forced to enter by authoritarian fathers and fa-

1 Behn, Oroonoko 33.
milieus. These unions are most of the time destroyed by young lovers to whose advantage the situations turn. In should also be stressed that, in spite of the assumptions of promiscuity extrapolated by her contemporaries or by more recent critics from her life and works, her's was an unrequited quest for a complete and faithful love.

Another element, her stay in Surinam, that contributed to the composition of Aphra Behn's consciousness is much more limited in space and time but had certainly the largest influence on her, although she drew belatedly on her recollections to give birth to the work that made her famous in her lifetime and today. Oroonoko is set in the colony that was to be bartered with New Amsterdam in Breda in 1667; there, at the time, first Royalists, then Republicans sought refuge. Voltaire used the story of the Royal Slave in Candide to point to the harsh treatment inflicted on slaves. When Aphra Behn reached the colony, she was struck by the lush physical environment, the seemingly everlasting pleasant season (she must have left before the rains or abstained from mentioning them); during her stay, trees always bore fruits, flowers were always in full bloom, game and fish were plentiful. In short, the colony looked like Paradise regained, yet with reservations since this apparently propitious nature was swarming with snakes of enormous sizes, tigers which could not be slain and fish whose contact threw men into a swoon. Above all, the description she gives of this natural environment brings out her sensuous approach to reality, however common this approach was among contemporaries who, on discovering the New World, had visions of a land flowing with milk and honey. William Penn, the Quaker, wrote to John Aubrey, depicting Pennsylvania almost in the same tones and with the same enthusiasm:

The Aier, heat and Cold Resemble the heart of France; the Soyls good, the Springs many and delightfull, the fruits, roots, corns and Flesh, as good as I have commonly eaten in Europe, I may say some of them better. Strawberrys ripe in the woods in Aprill, and in the last Month, Peas, beans,

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1 It is now acknowledged that Aphra Behn was in love with the notorious John Hoyle who appears in her works under the names of Amyntas, Lycidas or Lysander.
2 Behn, Oroonoko 72–6.
Cherrys and Mulberrys—The sort of fish in these parts are excellent and numerous. Sturgeon leap day and night that we can hear them a bow Shot from the Rivers in our beds—Minerals here is great Store,—Vines are here in Abundance everywhere,—

Yet it is not so much Aphra Behn’s description of nature which reveals her attitude towards the New World (and, therefore, by contrast, towards her own world and society) as her portrayal of the Amerindians, who first are viewed in a prelapsarian state but later assume the appearances of “hobgoblins[,] or fiends” in an atrocious scene of selfmutilation.2

In Oroonoko the description of Africa and Europe, that is England principally, also reveals aspects of Behn’s consciousness of her times and society. The court of the African monarch is given the features of some European counterpart with its intrigues and plots, however genuine its customs and traditions are. But “Coromantien” is not treated as Surinam; it does not partake of the apparent state of innocence; wars lead to callous slave-trading, which, it should be recalled, also existed among the natives of America; in Surinam the white settlers dared not turn the Caribs, actually Galibis, into a workforce since they were outnumbered by them. Oroonoko, like the Amerindians, has no experience of lying and is as surprised at the treachery of the English captain who captures him, as are the Indians are when Lord Willoughby, after giving his word, does not turn up. The Europeans are divided into two groups: on the one hand, Byam, the Lieutenant-Governor, and the rabble who kill Oroonoko in a horrible way; on the other, the French heretic, Oroonoko’s tutor, Treffry, his master, colonel Martin, “brother to Harry Martin, the great Oliverian” and Aphra Behn herself and her mother, sister and brother. There Aphra Behn assumes her full identity as a woman and as an omniscient narrator. Another recollection discloses again her sense of relativity, based on reason and objective observation: she condemns the “great Peele, that is, Prophet.”3 In this last instance Aphra

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2 Behn, Oroonoko 29 and 80.
3 These tricks are still practised in the Phillipines to operate on gullible patients.
Behn shows her refusal of superstition and her reliance on reason and objectivity,\(^1\) even though such a condemnation may be extended to the royal healing power: “Touching” to cure scrofula was still practiced by a detached and sceptical Charles II. His contemporary, John Aubrey, though superstitious, also expresses his doubt on the matter, after reporting a successful “Touching”:\(^2\)

The world Aphra Behn knew was rife with tensions. These were the results of religious conflicts dating back to the Reformation when Luther violently expressed his advocacy of bloodshed and was counterattacked with equal violence by the Church of Rome. Nevertheless, as expressed by the editor of Aubrey’s Brief Lives, “Catholicism had been looked on with sympathy by the upper classes ever since the Reformation.”\(^3\) Another feature of the era was the widespread use of such words as “plot”, “deception” as well as “sham” (coined, according to the O.E.D., in 1677). Charles II set the example of double-dealing with the secret Treaty of Dover, followed in a more conspicuous way by his brother. There were periods of extremes when the peril of Rome was acutely felt, sometimes for groundless reasons (the Popish Plot, the three Exclusion Bills), or, when the Whigs or “Fanatics” were becoming allegedly or really audacious (the Meal Tub Plot, the Rye House Plot, and eventually Monmouth’s rebellion). Puritans and nonconfomists, with all their shades of creeds, stood for opposition and resistance to Catholicism and absolutism. Did Aphra Behn feel unwittingly the latter was doomed to disappear, like anything else that is forced on individuals, marriage or convents, and give way to a Parliamentary monarchy? Indeed the tones and content of her last public poems, the odes addressed to Dr Burnet and Queen Mary, suggests she did.\(^4\)

In this context, issues raised by religion on political grounds were the themes that recurred in most writings of the time and Aphra Behn’s works are no exception. Her Epistle to the Reader, prefacing her third play, echoes the fashion of the day in a satirical way: she professes honesty towards her reader whom she does not

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\(^1\) Behn, Oronoko 79.
\(^2\) Dick, Aubrey’s Brief Lives LXVIII-LXIX.
\(^3\) Dick, Aubrey’s Brief Lives LXXXVIII.
wish to cheat:

I have dealt pretty fairly in the matter, told you in the Title Page what you are to expect within. Indeed, had I hung a sign of the Immortality of the Soul, of the Mystery of Godliness, or of Ecclesiastical Policie, and then had treated you with Indiscerpibility and Essential Spissitude (words, which though I am no competent judge of, for want of Languages, yet I fancy strongly ought to mean just nothing) with a company of Apocryphal midnight Tales cull'd out of the choicest Insignificant Authors;—I were then indeed sufficiently in fault.1

Apart from deriding religious treatises in this first instance, Aphra Behn, throughout her writings, expresses her views on and awareness of religion along three main lines. These can be identified as follows: 1) her opposition to Puritans, “Fanaticks” or Whigs, which is part of her unflinching devotion to the Stuart Monarchy; 2) her thorough knowledge of and apparent adherence to Roman Catholicism; 3) and her repeated and deep attachment to libertinism and scepticism, verging on atheism. The situation is seldom clearcut: there are frequent overlappings and opposite opinions which often contradict the three main lines. Her long list of Catholic dedicatees reflects Aphra Behn’s religious allegiances; but, when forced by circumstances, she would address her Epistles to avowed Protestants (Nell Gwyn, Fitzroy) or to a recusant (Henry Howard, whom she congratulated for abjuring Roman Catholicism).2

1) Aphra Behn’s opposition to Puritans and nonconformists.

Bellmour, in The Town-Fop, expresses his contempt for straitlaced Puritanism and “Conventiclers” whose fear of damnation prevents them from enjoying life: “I love a Man that will be damn’d for something; to creep by slow degrees to Hell, as if he were afraid the World shou’d see which way he went, I scorn it, tis like a Conventicler—.”3 The next comedy where nonconformists are

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1 Summers, The Works of Aphra Behn vol. I 221.
2 v. The Passionate Shepherdess where attention is paid to all the dedicatees who are as many clues to Aphra Behn’s religious and political positions.
3 Summers, The Works of Aphra Behn vol. III 64.
Aphra Behn’s laughing stocks is Sir Patient Fancy: Sir Patient inveighs against his nephew Leander for supposedly being “a Papist too, or at least a Church-of-England man.” The same treatment is reserved for Mr Tickletext, a model of hypocrisy. In The Feign’d Cartezans, he is the next butt for Aphra Behn’s satire against non-conformists: the Chaplain whose progress to perdition is clearly exposed throughout the play, after putting on a disguise, expresses his joy at being free to dissemble:

Well, certo, ’tis a wonderful pleasure to deceive the World: And as a learned Man well observ’d, that the Sin of Wenching lay in the Habit only; I having laid that aside, Timothy Tickletext, principal Holder-forth of the Covent-Garden Conventicle, Chaplain of Buffoon-Hall in the County of Kent, is free to recreate himself.

In 1682, three years later, the criticism is harsher in The Roundheads. Aphra Behn makes use of real characters of the Commonwealth period and depicts the end of the era prior to Charles II’s return. Her purpose is to revive animosity against “the (falsely called) True Protestant Party.” The latter’s forerunners were the proponents of the “Good Old Cause.” Her attacks on “Fanaticks” reach their climax in The Love Letters. In the posthumous play, The Younger Brother, produced in 1690, a tagname more to the point than Tickletext serves to enhance the satire cast at chaplains: Mr Twang is an obvious caricature of conventiclers and their nasal way of speaking. In the same play, next to this stock character, there appears George Martin, as announced in Oroonoko. His father, again the butt of Aphra Behn’s satire, is a nonconformist whose favorite reading is “the Pilgrim’s Progress”, while his brother, Sir Merlin, sings a “Song in praise of a Rake-hell’s Life.” However the latter has nothing to do with “Harry Martin the great Oliverian”, absent from the play. However the portrayal, in The Roundheads, of a character of the same ilk, Corporal Right, (another

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1 Summers, The Works of Aphra Behn vol. IV 93.
2 Summers, The Works of Aphra Behn vol. II 357.
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2) Aphra Behn’s knowledge of and apparent adherence to Roman Catholicism.

If it is recognized that the characters in her stories and plays are to some degree as many personae, their recurring allusions to and comments upon Roman Catholicism are revealing: Aphra Behn obviously had a first-hand knowledge of rituals, convents and monasteries. The direct confession by Aphra Behn herself in *The History of the Nun* bears evidence of this knowledge: “I once was design’d an humble votary in the house of devotion . . . “.1 The detailed and precise description of Octavio’s ordination in *The Love Letters*, with its mystical and erotic overtones is now an anthology piece.2 This passage may deserve to be listed with other existing baroque manifestations of mysticism such as Bernini’s *Saint Theresa*. One can quote from among the earlier allusions, also substantiating Aphra Behn’s knowledge of Roman Catholicism, the one made by Phillis, Bellmour’s sister, who, on hearing her uncle has abandoned her without a dowry, cries out: “Wou’d I were in Flanders at my Monastery again, if this be true.”3 In 1688, *The Fair Jilt* was dedicated to Henry Neville Payne, “a thorough Tory and an ardent partisan of James II”,4 and *Oroonoko* to Richard Maitland: “so great a Champion for the Catholic Church”.5 Again in 1688,

1 Behn, *Oroonoko* 153.


3 Summers, *The Works of Aphra Behn* vol. II 79. Phillis’s expotulation has an echo in *The History of the Nun* where Aphra Behn herself ponders on her mistake in not having sought a shelter from “the false ungrateful world” in “the innocence and quiet of a cloyster.” Behn, *Oroonoko* 154.


5 The eulogy appeared in one edition, then was deliberately excised; this is revealed by Duchovnay, G. “Aphra Behn’s Religion,” *Notes and Queries* (May–June, 1979) 233-7 where the case for Aphra Behn’s Roman Catholicism is well defended and supported by theological points expressed in “The Translator’s Preface” in *A Discovery of the New Worlds* (London: 1688).
Aphra Behn produced one of her last public poems, *To Sir Roger L'Estrange*, where she lamented the martyrdom of Stafford, who died at Tyburn a victim to the Popish Plot eight years earlier:

Here Noble Stafford fell, on Death's great Stage,
A Victim to the Lawless Peoples Rage.
Calm as a Dove, receiv'd a shameful Death;
To undeceive the World, resign'd his Breath;
And like a God, dy'd to redeem Our Faith.¹

Although Aphra Behn avowed her opinions, in the dedication to *The City Heiress* (1682), she praised both Henry Howard's family and their strong attachment to Roman Catholicism and, counter to her praise, Henry's courage in abjuring.² In 1688, she related how vain her efforts were to convert Oroonoko to Christianity; one may also wonder whether, in the same tale, the "stories of nuns" she undertook to tell Imoinda supposedly in order to impress her, did not achieve the opposite of her purpose by depicting convent life: another form of bondage as it is in the actual stories Aphra Behn left us. In a similar, but more direct way, Aphra Behn seemed to question the practice of monastic life in her posthumous play, *The Younger Brother* (1696), when Prince Frederick remembered attending an ordination: "Arriv'd at Ghent, I went to see an English Nun initiated, where I beheld the pretty Innocent, deliver'd up a Victim to foolish Chastity".³

3) Aphra Behn's attachment to libertinism, scepticism and atheism.

Running parallel to the first two lines, there is an unbroken sequence of characters, names and personal comments which throws into relief Aphra Behn's links with libertinism, scepticism and atheism.

As early as 1673, in *The Dutch Lover*, where she mocks religious treatises in "The Epistle to the Reader", she displays her awareness of trends of thoughts and writings which were central to seventeenth-century learned circles, the Rota, Gresham College and

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the Royal Society: “If I had only proved in Folio that Apollonius was a naughty knave. . .”; after naming, as one can judge from the context, Apollonius of Tyana, a Pythagorean philosopher who influenced the Rosicrucians, she goes on to refer to “the peremptory and ill-natur’d (though prettily ingenious) Doctor of Malmbury. . .” 71 Hobbes is neither scorned nor rejected in this passage, though one perceives on the part of Aphra Behn some reluctance to accept the state of nature as expounded in Leviathan.

Three characters, created in three plays published in 1677, are the first in a long and uninterrupted series of libertines. Bellmour, in The Town-Fop, who expresses his contempt at “Conventiclers”, sets the tone. Referring to “the Laws of God”, he replies to Lord Plotwell: “Sir, there are Men enough, fitter than I, to obey those Laws; nor do I think them made for every one.” 2 George Careless, in The Debauchee, follows suit with a song:

A pox of the Cautious Fool,
That limits his Time, and his Glass:
Who drinks, and who wences by rule,
Is Damn’d for a Cynical Ass.
But give me the Boy that is gay,
Whose time is his slave, and will drink
Beyond the dull limits of day,
And ne’er from his Company shrink. 8

Willmore, The Rover, is the next libertine whose model might be among others, John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester. 4 At the latter’s death, Aphra Behn mourned the loss of her model in rather unchristian terms:

Mourn, Mourn, ye Muses, all your loss deplore,
The Young, the Noble Strephon is no more.
Yes, yes, he fled quick as departing Light,
And n’ere shall rise from Deaths eternal Night, 5

1 Summers, The Works of Aphra Behn vol. I 221.
4 Duffy, The Passionate Shepherdess 144-5.
The "eternal Night" is a denial of any hope of resurrection and echoes the first tercet of a French sonnet published in 1667 by Jacques Vallée des Barreaux. This libertine who, like Hobbes, was influenced by the Paduan school, was a confirmed atheist and had written:

D un sommeil éternel la mort sera suivie;
J'entre dans le néant quand je sors de la vie
O déplorable état de ma condition!

The same image coined by Cathllus in A'd Leobian, concludes The Golden Age:

The Sun and Spring receive but our shot Light,
Once sett, a Sleep brings an Eternal Night.

Both the poem on the death of Rochester and The Golden Age are indeed devoid of any religious connotations and seem to bear evidence of an atheistic streak in Aphra Behn's stance. Rochester reappears in the second part of The Rover in the mountebank episode.

Aphra Behn then praises in a poem Thomas Creech's translation of Lucretius' De Natura Rerum: "To the Unknown Daphnis on his Excellent Translation of Lucretius." In his preface, the translator, in order to fend off censorship and attacks for impiety, announces "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 publick view." Thomas Creech stresses the link between between Lucretius and Hobbes:

Besides the admirers of Mr Hobbes may easily discern that his Politicks are but Lucretius enlarg'd, his state of Nature is sung by our Poet; the rise of Laws; the beginning of Society; the Criterion of Just and Unjust exactly the same and natural Consequents of the Epicurean Origines of Man.

2 Summers, The Works of Aphra Behn vol. VI 144, 422.
3 The poem is dated January 25. 1682.
4 T(itus) Lucretius Caius, The Epicurean Philosopher His six Book De Natura Rerum Done in English with Notes (Oxford: 1682) Preface.
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Aphra Behn, in her poem, while commending the translator poet for his achievement, pays tribute to his College in Oxford, Wadham, whose Warden was Wilkins, the author of *The Discovery of a World in the Moon*, 1640, and *The Discovery of a New World*, 1642, and where Strephon-Rochester and Thrisis-Sprat were students, all of them later members of the Royal Society; it must be noted that students at Wadham were not required to take orders in the Established Church; hence the liberal tradition to the College where "dull Religion" played no role in the curriculum.

In 1685, *A Paraphrase on the Lords Prayer* is another landmark expressing Aphra Behn’s views on the fate of man and woman, as well as on sexuality and religion; she adopts a current device, parody, to make "an ironic but conceivably also sad commentary on the difference between ideal and actuality." The "Paraphrase" is indeed more than "a request" to "her Maker to grant her a private Act of Toleration for a little harmless Love, otherwise called Fornication", as a contemporary judged it. Indeed it adds up to the revelations of Aphra Behn’s views on the human predicament.

There appeared respectively in 1682 and 1683 two treatises which, among other publications, had no doubt caught Aphra Behn’s attention: *A Treatise of Cleanliness in Meats and Drinks and The Way to Health and Happiness.* Thomas Tryon, the "mad hatter", was a disciple of Jacob Boehme and *A Pythagorean of the 17th Century*, which

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2 T. G. Jackson, *Wadham College* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893) "...he [Nicholas Wadham, the founder] would not tye any man to any profession as either divinitie law or Physicke, but leave every man free to profess what he liked as it should please God to direct him." p. 14.


3 Aphra Behn’s own phrase appears in her poem, as well as the names, Thrisis, Strephon and Daphnis, which she gave to Thomas Sprat, Rochester and Creech respectively. The poem is in Summers, *The Works of Aphra Behn* vol. VI 166-70.


is the title of the first study on this mystic, published in 1671. His theories on diet and hygiene were applied by Aphra Behn, as she expressed clearly in her verses. However the poem she wrote for his third treatise, *The Way to Make All People Rich*, published in 1685, is more than a superficial encomium of the mystic’s food and health principles; Aphra Behn, apparently ignoring his strict rules on women’s conduct, had also received the message of this unusual spiritual guide, successively a shepherd, an apprentice hatter, a planter in Barbados and an independent “Seeker” who worked out his own theosophy.

In 1687 Aphra Behn reported indirectly her explorations into new fields: in her play, *The Emperour in the Moon*, Doctor Baliardo is struck by madness after “reading foolish Books”, among which there is a “Philosophical Piece, A Discourse of the World in the Moon”; indeed, Cyrano de Bergerac’s work: *L’autre Monde ou les États et Empires de la Lune*. Paris, 1650, foreshadows Fontenelle’s *Entretiens sur la Pluralité des Mondes* and is an attack on religion, extolling incipient science; *L’Autre Monde*, too, was written by a hermetic philosopher. In the same play, Aphra Behn refers to “the Caballists of the Rosycrucian Order”, in a derisive way; in another passage she holds up the mad Doctor to ridicule who misconstrues “the Count of Cabalis”, a French work mocking the same Rosicrucians. While apparently casting ridicule upon esoteric doctrines, Aphra Behn shows her awareness and knowledge of them and may be asserting the opposite of what was effectively her thought, a common practice in the period (v. Thomas Creech’s Preface above). The links between some members of the Royal Society (Newton, Ashmole, Oldenburg . . .) and esoteric circles can also be borne in mind.

In 1687 again, Aphra Behn reintroduces the character of the Restoration rake under two tagnames: Gayman and Bellmour, in *The Luckey Chance*; they are the reincarnations of George Careless, Will-

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more, the Rover, and the first Bellmour, created ten years earlier. In this play Aphra Behn stresses her perduring adherence to libertinism.

Three publications in 1688, The History of the Oracles, A Discovery of New Worlds and Oroonoko deserve special attention since they mark to a certain degree the concluding stage of Aphra Behn’s views on religion.

When Fontenelle translated De Oraculis Ethnicorum, a treatise written in Latin by a Dutch doctor, Van Dale, he was attacking first Roman Catholicism. In his French translation, Fontenelle only retained the attacks against paganism in order to raise his own on a broader plane against errors in judgements and against all creeds in which fabricated facts are turned into solid truths. Aphra Behn, when translating Histoire des Oracles stuck to the plan adopted by Fontenelle and in her “Epistle Dedicatory” to Lord Jeffreys, contended that:

"'Tis a Discourse of Religion, in a time when we have scarce any other Theme; 'tis grown so general a Mode, that even the Sword-men are fiercer disputants than heretofore the lazier Gown-men were, while every Spark of noise enough, (sometime the best of the Argument) shew his Wit and Learning on that subject. But since the stream runs that way, I believ’d it as ridiculous to appear in good company drest like Mrs Abigail, [a servant] as (at this time) not to be arguing some points of Religion, tho’ never so Mal à propo. [sic] But least, by such an undertaking I should, as many do, but the more embarass the Mystries of it, we shall treat here only of the Pagan Religion, and of the abominable Cheats of the Oracles and their Priests."¹

It is difficult not to believe that Aphra Behn was fully conscious of the legerdemain, or “hocus-pocus trick”² performed by Fontenelle: her attacks were no doubt levelled at the “Mystries” of religion themselves. In 1686 Fontenelle published the work which was to ensure him fame throughout the eighteenth century, Entretiens sur la Pluralité des Mondes. Three main points are treated in these five “Entretiens”: the Copernican revolution, the utopian

¹ The History of Oracles and the Cheats of the Pagan Priests. (London, 1688).
existence of other inhabited universes and a modern view on science and progress implying relativity and materialism. Aphra Behn not only perceived these but also displayed acute awareness of the scientific progress of her times in "The Translator's Preface", announced on the front page as: "a Preface by was of Essay on Translated Prose: 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: Wholly new." She first shows how groundless the attacks by the Jesuit André Tacquet among others are against Copernican theories, since one can interpret the Scriptures in favour of Ptolemy as well as Copernicus: after referring to "a Precedent... Mr Burnet's Book of Paradise and Antedeluvian World" (whose unorthodoxy is mentioned by Maureen Duffy),\(^1\) she concludes on the need to view the Bible in an allegorical way and to be tolerant "in an Age, wherein many believe nothing contained in that holy Book, others turn it into Ridicule: Some use it only for Mischief, and as a Foundation for Rebellion: Some keep close to the Literal Sense, and others give the Word of God only that Meaning and Sense that pleases their own Humours, or suits their present Purpose and Interests." There follows a passage, from which Aphra Behn's knowledge of Roman Catholicism can be rightly extrapolated: "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;..."\(^2\) She leaves it to the "Learned" in matters "relating to Astronomy, Geology, Chronology, or other liberal Sciences,... by comparing several Copies, Translations, Versions, and Editions of the Bible,... to reconcile any apparent Differences;..." and reasserts her apparent adherence to Roman Catholicism when she resumes her previous advice, this time addressed to "scientists" "and this with all Submission to the Canons of General Councils, and Decrees of the Church." Is it necessary to recall the importance of the last Council of Trent which was the starting point of the Counter-Reformation? In spite of this official declaration of orthodoxy, she gives an ambig-

\(^1\) Duffy, The Passionate Shepherdess 279-83.

\(^2\) v. Duchovnay, (note 34).
uous ending to her "Preface", "I hope my Readers will be so just as to think, I intend no Reflection on Religion by this Essay; which being no matter of Faith, is free for every one to believe, or not to believe, as they please. I have adventur’d to say nothing, but from good Authority."

The penultimate paragraph ends on an announcement which has not hitherto been singled out for attention; Aphra Behn did intend to go further in the "Works of Intellect";¹ "And as this is approved of by the World, I may hereafter venture to publish somewhat may be more useful to the Publick." Unfortunately, her death prevented whatever project she entertained undertaking.

In the last paragraph she reveals that she was conversant with most of her century's scientific knowledge by quoting Descartes's and Rohault's theories in order to correct Fontenelle who refers to the former only; Aphra Behn had certainly heard of, or even read, both Frenchmen's works to make such corrections.²

Though the announced publication in the vein of her "Essay" never appeared, her scepticism and unorthodoxy came to the fore in Oroonoko. The Royal Slave, just like the Amerindians, is used as a foil against the Whites' and Christians' hypocrisy. Oroonoko, when instructed in Christianity by Aphra Behn, questions "our notions of Trinity, of which he ever made a jest; it was a riddle he said would turn his brain to conceive, and one cou'd not make him understand what faith was."³ The symbolism of Oroonoko's atrocious execution is ambiguous: it can be viewed as a repetition of Charles I's martyrdom and a parody of Christ's Passion, since the Royal Slave does not forgive his torturers and dies a Pagan, in spite of all his qualities. Should it be recalled that the French translation in 1745 gave a more Christian ending to the story? Oroonoko and Imoinda are made free and sent back to Africa.⁴

³ Behn, Oroonoko 69.
⁴ Pierre Antoine de la Place. Oroonoko, ou le Prince Nègre (Paris, 1745).
This questioning of Christianity and religion by Oroonoko, as well as his inverted Christlike figure, together with the Virgin Mary's absence in her "nuns' stories" may add up to the likelihood of Aphra Behn's atheism and scepticism.

Thus, while it is almost impossible to draw the line between politics and religion in the seventeenth century, it is likewise difficult to categorize and define Aphra Behn's religion. As the extensive list of manifestations in her works seems to stress, she was brought up in the religion of the Church of Rome, but adopted a somewhat diffident attitude towards it, believing in the teachings of Christ but not in his ministers and retaining above all a strong sense of honesty, loyalty and fidelity, based on a modern approach where reason and tolerance played an important role. Unlike the Metaphysical poets, among whom she admired Abraham Cowley and Andrew Marvell, who "controlling their imagination and sensibility, achieved a perfect balance in a blend of passion and intellectual sensibility"; Aphra Behn allowed free rein to her passion, love, and gave a baroque vision of the world she lived in. In the process, she may have been guilty of innocent or negligent misrepresentation but never of wilful misrepresentation. She is a true representative of her time, echoing the various strands of thought, ranging from scepticism, libertinism, toleration to concordism where science and religion were upholding each other. These various strands of thought were expressed by the members of the circles she knew: the Court wits and her friends in the Royal Society, to name these two circles only. However true to the woman she appears in her portraits—a woman, who, it is felt, lived to the full and knew the value of feminine beauty and did not demur to it—she denounced hypocrisy in all walks of life.

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