

‘Unlink the chain’: Experimentation in Aphra Behn’s Novels

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The founding of the Royal Society in 1660 epitomised the philosophical adventurousness of early modern England: aiming to harness Baconian experimental philosophy with entrepreneurial economic or colonial development, the Royal Society has often also been associated with what became known as a Whiggish political ideology of individual liberty, in opposition to the potential absolutism of Stuart monarchialismⁱ. However, this version of historical and cultural ideas is itself intrinsically Whiggish: it assumes both a progressive trajectory of political developments and a binary association between theories of political individualism and scientific experiment (Webster, 1975)ⁱⁱ. The very fact that the society which espoused experimental thought was patronised by the monarch, and had fought for recognition under the protectorate, is evidence enough of the more complex relationships between politics, experimentalism and individualism (Webster 1975, 484-522). Experimentalism was not only a means of trialling new ideas and technical inventions, but also a mode of being, a way of thinking. Robert Boyle wrote in 1690:

[the virtuosi] consult Experience both frequently and heedfully; and not content with the *Phaenomena* that Nature spontaneously affords them, they are solicitous, when they find it needful, to enlarge their Experience by Tryals purposely devis’d; and ever and anon Reflecting upon it, they are careful to Conform their opinions to it; or, if there be just cause, Reform their Opinions by it (Boyle 11, p.292).

Thomas Sprat’s magisterial and influential *History of the Royal Society* (1667) particularly celebrated the necessary intersection between the development of experimental ideas and new knowledge alongside an appropriate experimental style:

Thus they [the men of the Royal Society] have directed, judg’d, conjectur’d upon and improved *Experiments*. But lastly, in these and all other businesses, that have come under their Care; there is one thing more, about which the Society has been most solicitous; and that is, the manner of their Discourse; which, unless they had been very watchful to keep in due Temper, the whole Spirit and Vigour of their design had been soon eaten out, by the luxury and redundancy of Speech. ... They [The Royal Society] have therefore been more rigorous in putting in Execution the only Remedy

that can be found for this Extravagance; and that has been a constant Resolution to reject all Amplifications, Digressions, and Swellings of Style; to return back to the primitive Purity and Shortness, when Men deliver'd so many things, almost in an equal Number of Words (Sprat, 1667, Part II, section xx, pp.112-3)

Aesthetics and thinking were equally and explicitly experimental in the period following Charles II's Restoration to the monarchy in 1660. But, crucially, this radical insight was gendered as both a masculine pursuit (Margaret Cavendish was famously denied membership of the Royal Societyⁱⁱⁱ) and experimental style as an explicitly masculinised practice. Spratt goes on to proclaim:

This conclusion [should] be made: that if ever our Native Tongue shall get any Ground in Europe, it must be by augmenting its experimental Treasure. Nor is it impossible, but as the Feminine Arts of Pleasure and Gallantry have spread some of our neighbouring Languages to such a vast Extent; so the English Tongue may also in time be more enlarg'd by being the Instrument of conveying to the World the Masculine Arts of Knowledge (p.119)

Feminist re-readings of science and masculinism in the late seventeenth century have contributed much to our knowledge of the ways in which the philosophy of science, methodologies and language have been complicit from the early modern period in the solidification of a bourgeois binary gender system.^{iv} Equally, recent work on the intersection of the discourses of mastery in the practices of science, slavery and proto-capitalism has proved illuminating (Singh, 2018).

I argue that Behn's prose fiction and translations were intellectually and aesthetically engaged with these contemporary ideologies and practices of experimentalism. Ian Watt's classic text *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) linked the emergence of the new genre to the rise of bourgeois individualism, reifying Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* as the archetypal novel. This historiography has been rightly challenged by materialist and feminist critics, who variously acknowledge Behn, Manley and Haywood as Defoe's contemporaries or predecessor practitioners of the novel, as well as complicating an exact equation between individualism, style and form (Todd 1989; Armstrong 1987; Spender 1988; Spencer 1986; Ballaster 1993; and Carnell 2006). Nevertheless, there remains a critical consensus that a new genre emerges in the early modern period, recognised by contemporary readers, writers and booksellers by

the unstable noun 'novel' (news/ new thing), which gradually came to refer to the genre. Aphra Behn's prose publications from 1684 until her death in 1689 were dominated by experiments in this new form.

By particularly locating Aphra Behn's experiments of the 1680s within the context of her political and dramatic career and contemporary philosophical experimentalism, this chapter both acknowledges those feminist re-calibrations of the history of the novel, and develops a more explicitly aesthetic account of that experimentalism through close textual analysis of Behn's experimental prose techniques. I suggest that a binary classification of experimentalism with liberal or left-leaning politics is a simplification of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, and conversely, that the recent critical commonplace that Behn's Tory politics dominate all her political thinking and writing is a reductive simplification of both her political views and her aesthetic practice^v. Through such analysis, we can return to larger questions about how we might describe experiments in the novel form, as well as Behn's status as an innovative writer and thinker.

Behn's writing career follows a trajectory which partly mirrors political pressures: between her first staged play in 1670 and 1682 she wrote and produced 11 plays for the public stage, as well as one collection of poetry. In the early 1680s two separate events affected theatrical production for all playwrights: the two theatre companies merged to form a single monopoly (due to financial pressures particularly on the King's Company) and the attempted Whig rebellion to de-throne Charles II (known as the Rye House Plot in 1682-3) was discovered and defeated. The theatrical monopoly meant reduced commercial competitive pressure for the new United Company to produce new plays. The Rye House Plot generated genuine political anxiety about another civil war, and political plays (of whatever party) were not performed, as Behn's Preface to her *Lucky Chance* in 1686 testifies. Perhaps Behn was already turning her aesthetic to prose fiction and translation, and the dearth of theatrical opportunities enabled her to concentrate on these. For the next seven years, until her death, her output was extraordinary. In addition to three plays (*The Lucky Chance* in 1686; *The Emperor of the Moon* in 1687 and the posthumous *Widow Ranter* in 1689) and some poetry collections, Behn wrote and published a huge range of prose, both original and translated. In 1684 she produced the first part of *Love Letters from a Nobleman to his Sister*. In 1685, she followed with the second volume and her translation

of Rochefoucauld's *Maxims* as *Seneca Unmasked or Moral reflections from the French* in 1685. In 1686, she produced her translation of Bonnecourse's *The Lover's Watch*. In 1687, she translated a version of Aesop's *Fables*, and produced the third part of *Love Letters*. In 1688 she produced further experiments in the novel with *Oroonoko*, *The Fair Jilt*, and *Agnes de Castro* and the translation of Fontanelle's *A Discovery of New Worlds*. In 1689, the year of her death, the novellas *The History of the Nun, or the Fair Vow Breaker* and *The Lucky Mistake*. It is impossible in a short chapter to do credit to these individual works, instead I shall identify how Behn is explicitly experimenting with modes of prose fiction, and forging the lineaments of the British novel.

In the second volume of Behn's three-part novel *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister* (1685) Silvia writes a letter to Octavio (her lover's confidant) protesting her feelings about her recent discovery that her lover Philander has been betraying her whilst abroad on supposed political business. Using the contemporary language of mutual contractual obligations, she claims 'if he unlink the Chain I am at perfect liberty'^{vi} (*Love Letters*, p.201). Here Silvia, the novel's heroine, invokes both the language of contract ('unlink the chain') and the language of libertinism (liberty as sexual freedom) in one short phrase. The previous letters between the two lovers debate the question of sexual freedom heatedly in the conventional *carpe diem* terms of the seventeenth century, particularly through Philander's active and aggressive courtship of Silvia, from his first letter onwards (*Love Letters*, 11-12). In defending the superiority of erotic love over the social conventions of marriage, Philander invokes all the tropes of the Restoration Libertine: and during the course of the novel, Silvia comes to mirror this language, and even to find a female version of it in her described gaze over his body. The language of obligation (often associated with Tory political monarchical theory in the early modern period) is juxtaposed with the language of libertinism. In particular, Silvia's voice in a letter to Philander, whilst celebrating her delight in his physical appearance and her erotic feelings towards him, also urges him to remain faithful to his monarch, and not to follow the rebels (*Love Letters*, pp. 37-43). This particular letter implies two versions of 'liberty': for Philander, sexual and political liberty are mutually co-extensive and consequent upon a philosophical belief in Hobbesian individualism. However, for Silvia sexual liberty does not connote political individualism: alongside her female libertinism she retains an attachment to political and social theories of

obligation. Many critics have seen this position as indicative of Silvia's confusion or innocence, or have cited it as proof of Behn's political Toryism (and therefore implied conservatism), arguing that Behn suggests Silvia's folly, or fall into sexual experience, is because she cannot connect the personal to the political, sexual libertinism to political libertinism and disentangle Philander's arguments (Todd 1993, vol 3, notes; and Carnell 2006, pp. 44-73). But Silvia emerges as a shrewd linguistic operator by developing and working through an intertwining of these two opposed discourses. Silvia's sense of what 'obligation' means evolves into her implicit evocation of a contract ('if he unlink the chain') between a man and a woman, in which each can mirror the other's actions and language, in which a man and woman have equal obligations. Silvia's character consistently focuses on how language works to represent and construct emotion, action and response. For example, in one letter to Philander she writes:

The Rhetorick of Love is half-breath'd, interrupted words, languishing Eyes, flattering Speeches, broken Sighs, pressing the hand and falling Tears (*Love Letters*, p.33)

Despite her expressed desire in this letter to argue logically against such rhetoric, she admits its overwhelming power: she both sees it as a discursive construction and yet succumbs to it: she is both inside and outside the language.

I suggest that Behn's novels are equally compromising. Behn both uses dominant rhetorical models and genres and supersedes them: she thus can be said to resonate both within and beyond her cultural contexts (and perhaps this is a definition of the experimental feel of women's writing). She 'unlinks the chain' of conventional generic and discursive representations and referents through both aesthetic (formal, grammatical and linguistic technical) experiments and a validation of the female voice and gaze. Behn's translation of Rochefoucauld's *Maxims* (1686), with their philosophical emphasis on sceptical engagement with the social and political world, alongside a formal commitment to an Senecan aesthetic of an abrupt, pointed style, suggests that at the very time of writing and experimenting in novel writing, Behn was intellectually engaged by this sceptical and aesthetic philosophy. The *Maxims* set forth a relativist philosophical stance ('interest that blinds one is the light of another'. Behn, 1993, 4, p.307) and a materialist philosophy:

The humours of our bodies have an extraordinary course, which unperceivably turns and moves our wills, they roul and rove together and usurp successively a secret

empire within us in so absolute a manner, that they tyrannize over all our actions, almost without our knowledge. (239, p.350)

Historians of the plain style have argued that seventeenth-century prose style drew inspiration both from Seneca and scientific experimentalism (Jones 1953; Williamson 1951; Fish 1973), but this argument has not hitherto been applied to Aphra Behn's novel writing and thinking as experiment.

Behn's first such experimentation^{vii} lies in the form of this first novel, and the development of that form through the subsequent two parts. The formal construction of a novel as a series of letters originated in the translated *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (published in 1669), and, combined with the popularity of Madam de Lafayette's *Princesse de Cleves* (1678, translated into English in 1679), helped generate and foster an audience of readers who would buy fictions which were both more domestic and more contemporary than the conventional romance, from which they arguably evolved (Ballaster 1992). Behn's voracious reading in both French and English enabled a creative engagement with this tradition, which blossomed in these novel experiments. The first volume of her *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* consists solely of juxtaposed letters, with no overt third person narration. The epistolary form validates the 'I' as a narrative voice through first-person letters (for example, the grammatical use of the first person dominates most of Part 1); whilst Behn adapted this from *The Portugese Letters*, she is the first English writer to use the formal 'I' as foundational to a novel (Gervitz 2012). However, Behn is additionally experimental in the formal organisation of letters. For example, the domination of the male voice over the female character is formally echoed by opening with Philander's letters, showing how Silvia's voicing of libertine ideas (and acquiescence in her seduction) echoes his words and phrases. Equally, the insertion of additional voices through letters, including those of Silvia's sister, her maidservant, and Philander's friend Cesario, enables both a broadening of perspectives on the action (unlike later 'bourgeois' novels which find it difficult to filter multiple perspectives) and helps raise narrative tension by postponing our knowledge of a resolution of, or response to, the previous letter from Silvia or Philander.

The second part of *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* displays a new formal experiment, mixing letters with third person narrative; while the third part of the novel (published in 1688) consists predominantly of third person narrative with a few letters

acting as bridges. Behn thus uses the stage of the three- part publication to explore different formal methods to represent character, plot and voice: the formal shifts across the six years of the three-novel series illustrate her formal experiment with divergent modes of representation and voice. Although it has been argued that the epistolary form is a naive form of prose fiction (Watts, 1957), Behn exploits its radical potential in at least six ways. Firstly, the formal juxtaposition of letters to generate narrative gaps; second, the use of the present tense; third, the emergence and manipulation of free indirect prose; fourth, radical and formalised plotting; fifth, the articulation of an individual voice, perspective and identity through character; and finally, the emergent focus on an internalised sense of self in that character's apparently unmediated voice. Let us consider each of these in turn.

The formal juxtapositions of the letters enable the explicit insertion of a reader as part of the process of writing and reading. The form naturally invokes the initial letter reader, and the market of readers who buy the novel. The gaps between letters (of time, space and person) are self-consciously widened, utilising the natural cliff-hanger effect of juxtaposed letters to enable a number of narrative effects, including a readerly sense of the narrative organisation of the letters (and therefore indirectly of an over-arching authorial structure) and a narrative arc which builds on two linked tensions – that of Silvia's self-knowledge and internalised feelings, and our readerly desire for erotic consummation. These formal juxtapositions (of letters, speakers, readers and timeframes) echo and mirror experimental data and data sets which Royal Society scientists recommended (pace Bacon) as suitable to both the new experimental method and its representation as data without the overlay of distracting interpretative language. Behn's literary style is aesthetically a mirror of Royal-Society-Science.

Love Letters Part 2 uses the epistolary form to re-focalise the reader's critical reading on voice: the first seven letters are written by men and thus male voices and desires are literally seen to circulate and contain the voice and body of Silvia. The solitary nature of Silvia's voice in *Part 2* emphasises her singularity and her aloneness, so the nature of femininity is seen formally as both singular and 'between men'. These first seven letters establish an explicit homosocial bond based on shared discursive and social practices between the men who desire Silvia. Equally, these new letters throw the reader backwards into the first volume of the story: Philander's letters destabilise our reading of his previous

motivation and practices. He frankly admits his libertine self-interested motivations in seducing Silvia, as well as his desire for other women. Reading new letters thus becomes an act of re-reading old letters and re-interpreting them. Reading (and writing) are thus quickly figured as critical, partial and subjective. This meta-narrational insight is generated by Behn's formal manipulation (and flagging up) of the epistolary form. It is also a radical political and philosophical stance on representation and truth: one more closely allied to the scepticism of Rochefoucauld and Lucretius (and later novelists such as Sterne) than the absolutism of Stuart monarchalism or the more monologic forms of the eighteenth-century novel as practised by Defoe or Richardson.

Behn engages in a different kind of formal experimentation in *Oroonoko*. Its political content is self-evident: a story about a royal black slave who is executed had resonances both in Stuart cultural memory and in relation to the more contemporary practices of slave owners in Surinam. The elision of two such motifs (blackness and royalism) is arguably experimental enough, however, Behn's formal innovation lies in the juxtaposition of a number of genres and discourses. The novel's opening paragraph simultaneously claims an eyewitness account and act as a generic marker of what has often been described as unique features of Defoe's early novels. It is worth looking at Behn's opening in detail:

I do not pretend in giving you the history of this royal slave to entertain my reader with the adventures of a feigned hero whose life and fortunes may manage at the poet's pleasure, nor in relating the truth, design to adorn it with any accidents, but such as are arrived in earnest to him; and it shall come simply into the world, recommended by its own proper merits and natural intrigues, there being enough of reality to support it, and to render it diverting, without the addition of invention.

I was myself an eyewitness to a great part of what you will find here set down and what I could not be a witness of I received from the mouth of the chief actor in this history (*Oroonoko*, p.9).^{viii}

Here, the narratorial 'I' dominates our encounter with text and its referents: like Robinson Crusoe, this narrator claims both personal experience and eye-witness testimony (a validating tactic which Behn repeats in both part 3 of *Love Letters* and in *The History of the Nun* (Behn 1993, 77, p.140). This fictional eye-witness function enables the new novel to access a present-ness in an exciting new way which neither drama (because of licensing laws on performance) nor romance (because set remotely) allowed. Most histories of the novel establish realism as one of the key determiners distinguishing the new form from romances

(McKeon 1987; Watt 1957). Behn's initial narrative framing self-consciously positions her novel as 'novel' through the narrator's voice and manifesto. In a related way, the novel was celebrated because it focussed primarily on the lives of the more ordinary character within a broader but less specified political framework (unlike the romance)^{ix}; the eye-witness discursive frame enables the romance and political referents that follow to be read as interconnected. There are a number of additional ways in which Behn enhances and complicates this generic self-consciousness.

Behn's opener explicitly sets itself against the established Romance genre, which tended to cite historical sources and remote settings in time and place, and insists instead on personal and geographic immediacy. Even though the story is set in Africa and Surinam, the story's connection to London is made explicit through the narrator's claimed physical presence in Surinam and back in London. This is validated through concrete evidence; feathers she imported from Surinam were presented to the King, and then used as a stage property in Dryden's *Indian Queen* (*Oroonoko*, p.7).

Present-ness evokes the discourse of traveller's tales (just as Defoe does), and is associated with the assertion of a simple unadorned prose style: content and aesthetics are intertwined: a conventional critical pre-requisite for the discursive features of the early novel (Watt 1957, 31). Yet, despite the insistence on 'truth' and 'reality', the subsequent plot weaves elements of the exotic romance into the narrative arc: the idealised description of Oroonoko's nobility echoes that of many a romance tale from the occident; the description of his grandfather's harem and the tale of the two star-crossed lovers shift us into the world of idealised aristocratic romance. The bounce back into a narrative of war, slave trading and the broken oaths of plantation owners and traders, alongside anthropological accounts of the indigenous people and flora and fauna of Surinam generate jarring discursive juxtapositions. These narrative disruptions and discursive eruptions have often been read critically in a dismissive manner, as evidence of Behn's naïve prose narratives, because they do not precisely sit with a critical sense of the eighteenth-century novel's evened out representational style and mode (Todd 1998, 73-4).^x However, like the experimental style of the *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister*, these generic and discursive juxtapositions generate interpretative gaps into which the reader inserts herself: by thinking about the character of Oroonoko as both westernised romance hero *and* black

slave, the reader is forced to reflect both on how we judge heroism and on political behaviour. By showing how slave traders literally disrupt the romance society, and that the values of oath-keeping in one discourse are meaningless in another, Behn suggests and displays a radical way in which the novel can use formal means to generate political readings. Such a formal self-consciousness is absent from the novels celebrated by Watt and others as foundational: Behn is part of that alternative tradition through Sterne to Kundera and Rushdie who, in playing with genre and discourse, disrupt the notion of genre as a fixed model of representation and bourgeois identity formation.

The second arena of aesthetic experimentation is Behn's strategic use of the present tense. The letters of *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister* Part 1 utilise the immediacy of the present tense, which Behn then carries over into the prose narrative of Parts 2 and 3. This present-ness echoes the immediacy of scientific data sets, which present evidence as present. The evolution of the voice of the third-person omniscient narrator and the invention of free indirect discourse (see, for example, *Love Letters part 2*, p.135 and *Love Letters part 3*, p.224) anticipate the later work of Richardson or Austen. Behn engages in grammatical experimentation (of both tense and pronouns) to try out alternative models of character representation and readerly response. The intersection of letters creates a sense of immediacy of action: although recent past events can be referred to and narrated, the letter also enables the expression of present-tense feelings and insights, as well as the expression of future desires and anxieties. The letter as present-tense fulcrum for experience thus presents itself as the perfect formal equivalence to the data set of scientific experimentalism. These features can be seen in any one example of the letters:

To Philander

I have sent Brilljard to see if the Coast be clear that we may come with safety, he brings you instead of Silvia, a young Cavalier that will be altogether as welcome to Philander, and who impatiently waits his return at a little Cottage at the end of the Village. (*Love Letters*, p.106, my emphasis).

Personal experience is focalised through the intersection and control of grammatical tenses: the 'I' organises and accounts for experience: the experiential (experimental) is formally and grammatically foregrounded through a simulation of presence and of character. Focalisation through the letter and the present tense experience of writing and reading explicitly also

places the authorial voice at one remove from the reader's immediate experience - a formal parallel to the dramatic form at which Behn was so adept.

In her novel *The Fair Jilt*^{xi} (1688) this grammatical experimentation extends into a free-indirect prose style to represent action, character and internalised emotion, Behn's third arena of experimentation in her prose. For example, Behn writes:

Some moments she fancies him a lover, and that the fair object that takes up all his heart has left no room for her there; but that was a thought that did not long perplex her, and which almost as soon as born, she turned to her advantage. She beholds him a lover, and therefore finds he has a heart sensible and tender; he had youth to be fired as well as to inspire....

Now she revolves a thousand ways in her tortured mind to let him know her anguish, and at last pitched upon that of writing to him soft billets, which she had learned the art of doing; or if she had not, she had now fire enough to inspire her with all that could charm or move. These she delivered to a young wench who waited upon her..... which letter were all afterwards, as you shall hear, produced in open court. (*Fair Jilt*, pp.88-9)

The central narrative voice throughout the later novels (particularly in *The Fair Jilt* and *The History of the Nun*) moves - as here - between the immediate present and the past historic to suggest simultaneous connection and separation between authorial voice and character's focalisation and the representation of consciousness. This grammatical and pronoun elision (now labelled 'free indirect discourse') is often seen as a sophisticated technique developed to its fullest in Austen and later novelists^{xii}, here we can see that Behn's formal experimentation in the *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* has enabled the evolution of this flexible representational discourse in a prose non-epistolary novel. Such moments are not isolated examples: throughout the novel, the tension between authorial commentary and Miranda's individual voice, actions and motivations are what generate readerly engagement and critical judgment. This prose style acts as a conduit for the reader to experience divergent perspectives on action and experience, placing the interpretative burden firmly on the individual reader.

Behn's plotting is the fourth arena of aesthetic experimentation, and yet it has been dismissed as either aspirationally aristocratic (McKeon 1987; Carnell 2006, p.44) or as lacking the immediacy and urgency of Defoe's (McKeon 1987, p.27). However, the

consistent modelling of triangular relationships belies this reductive criticism. For example, it is clear that the consistent narrative arc of her novels focalises on the intersection between a (sometimes) explicitly female narrator and her characters: situating a set of relationships between writer, character and reader. Equally, in *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* triangular relationships between characters are continually asserted and explored. The title itself figures female identity as 'between' relationships defined by masculine primogeniture: Silvia's identity is defined by her status as sister-in-law to Philander and daughter to her father. This between-ness continues to be formally figured throughout the plot. I have already argued that the ordering of letters (particularly in the opening to the second book) figures Silvia's literal entrapment 'between men' (Kosofsky-Sedgwick, 1987)^{xiii}. This plot modelling continues through the way Silvia's voice is used to disrupt such comfortable homosocial discourses. Thus, for example, in her early letters (*Love Letters*, p.21 and 24ff), Silvia voices questions about the fine line between the easiness of brotherly love and erotic attraction, which Philander crosses. By blurring the distinction between fraternal and erotic love through the narrative plot, and drawing attention to it as discourse through Silvia's voice, Behn suggests that woman is an object of exchange within that discourse. Much of the plot of the three novels focuses on the pursuit of Silvia by the two male friends, Philander and Octavio, as well as her submission first to Philander and then Octavio. Whilst the two men compete for Silvia, their friendship remains their predominant bond. Even when the plot is further complicated by the fact that Philander's second major erotic conquest turns out to be Octavio's married sister, the men reconcile ('a friend's above a sister', *Love Letters*, p.377). This modelling of women as 'between men' is additionally illustrated in book 3 when Octavio's uncle and Octavio negotiate for Sylvia's body between them. Thus, parallel plots reinforce the narrative outcome that women are subject to arrangements between men, forming the apex of a triangle. There is one especially comic moment in the third book:

They both advanced and made about twenty passes before either received any wound ... In this condition (still fighting) Silvia (who had call'd 'em back in vain, and only in her Night-Gown) in a Chair pursued 'em, that Minute they quitted her Chamber) found 'em thus employed , and without any fear she threw herself between them. (*Love Letters*, p.357)

Behn's narrative style typically imagines scenes through visual semi-stage directions and the visual modelling illustrates female lives as literally (and comically) between men. The plot functions between men as both a structural and ideological model, but it is put under pressure by the actions and voices of women characters and (implied) readers.

Contemporary ideology is thereby challenged through formal experimentation. In volume 2 of *Love Letters Between A Nobleman and his Sister*, Behn reports Silvia's critical responses to the literal and lettered correspondence between Philander and Octavio in this reported speech:

Pray tell me, continued she, when you last writ to him, was it not in order to receive an answer from him? And was I not to see that answer? And here you think it no dishonour to break your word or promise; by which I find your false notions of Vertue and Honour, with which you serve yourselves, when int'rest, design, or self-love makes you think it necessary. (*Love Letters*, 2, p.195)

The combined effect of female narrator and female voice explicitly challenge political and social patriarchal practices.

Behn's fifth area of aesthetic experimentation lies not just in the voicing and plotting of these challenges, but in validating female and feminised voices as explicitly active intellectual and sexual agents. I have already discussed how the epistolary form of *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* enables and invites readers into the process of the narrative. This active engagement extends to an acknowledgement of critical reading as key to identity, particularly in the case of women readers, with Silvia as a proxy for other female readers. Silvia's disquisition on 'the rhetorick of love' is one such case in point. This intellectual activity is not only part of the process delivered by the formal arrangement of letters and content, when Silvia re-examines past conduct and words through each letter. In Book two, there is a point where Octavio forwards on to Silvia a letter of Philander's which he has read in one way as safe to pass on ('where he speaks of Silvia sure he disguises the lover'), but which Silvia suspects, reading it more critically and actively, means that Philander has found another lover (*Love Letters*, pp.140-1). Silvia then doubts her own reading skills, and asks Briljard (her nominal husband by now) to read Philander's letter:

. . . and told him (while he read) her doubts and fears; **he being thus instructed by her** self in the way how to deceive her on, like Fortunetellers who gather peoples Fortunes from themselves and then turn it back for their own Divinity; tells her he saw indeed a change! (*Love Letters part 2*, pp.147-8, my emphasis)

Female critical reading thus informs not only the direction of the plot, but also insights and perceptions of other characters. A careful critical reader will have reached the same conclusion as Silvia from reading Philander's letter. Silvia's strong political beliefs, voiced particularly in the first novel in her longest letter to Philander where she urges him not to succumb to an overly libertarian political credo (Todd, pp.37-43), validate female engagement in public discourse as well.

The sixth area in which Behn experiments is in the narrative arcs of her stories. *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* plots two narratives over the three volumes: the story of a fallen woman and the story of an emergent female agency, as Silvia increasingly manipulates sexual encounters for her own pleasure and reward. This sort of double narrative is echoed in both *The Fair Jilt* and *The History of the Nun or The Fair Vow Breaker*, and arguably models later narratives of seduction and titillation which purport to be moralised tales (including *Pamela* and *Clarissa*). However, the balance of Behn's narrative focus is on female agency in a domestic sphere as opposed to passivity in the eroticism of seduction.^{xiv} Thus, for example, the third-person narration of *The Fair Jilt* (the story of Miranda who happily and amorally manipulates family and lovers to achieve her own financial security) remains studiously uninvolved in any moral judgment of the heroine's actions, echoed in the experimental flat prose style. In *The History of the Nun*, Behn again narrates the fall of Isabella in a flat, almost scientific, prose, with one exception of apparent psychological explanation. In an extraordinary narrative twist, Isabella decides she will have to silence both her current and her ex-husband (who has returned from presumptive death in battle, unbeknown to anyone else). The narrator tells us:

She imagined that could she live after a deed so black, Villenoy's would be eternal reproaching her, if not with his tongue, at least with his heart, and emboldened by one wickedness, she was the readier for another, and another of such a nature as has, in my opinion, far less excuse than the first. But when fate begins to afflict, she goes throughstitch with her black work. (*History of the Nun*, Behn 1993, p.186)

The third person narrator provides this sole moral steer on Isabella's actions, nevertheless simultaneously giving a psychological justification for them.

The voice of female desire and decision-making in *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and his Sister* is validated by the epistolary form, but framed in the early letters by the way in which its discourse ('the rhetoric of love') echoes Philander's language and expression (which we read first). Nevertheless, the reader shares with Silvia her sexual awakening through her own voice and eyes. Compare:

I have no Arts Heav'n knows, no guile or double-meaning in my Soul, 'tis all plain native simplicity, fearful and timorous as Children in the Night, trembling as Doves pursu'd; born soft by Nature, and made tender by Love (*Love Letters*, p.24)

with her longest letter a few pages later:

Approach, approach you sacred Queen of Night, and bring Philander veil'd from all eyes but mine! Approach at a fond lover's call, behold how I ly panting with expectation, tir'd out with your tedious Ceremony to the God of day; be kind of lovely Night, and let the Deity descend to Thetis's Arms, and I to Philander's; the sun and I must snatch our joys in the same happy hours! ... I grow wild and know not what I say : Impatient Love betrays me to a thousand folly's a Thousand rashnesses: I dy with shame, but I must be undone, and 'tis no matter how, whether by my own weakness Philander's charms or both. (*Love Letters*, pp.37-8)

Silvia (and the reader) learn how to express erotic desire ('what though I lay extended on my Bed, undrest, unapprehensive of my fate, my Bosom loose and easie of excess, my Garments ready, thin and wantonly put on', *Love Letters*, p.68). Yet, simultaneously Sylvia's inner doubts and passions are explored through the 'I' of the letter's address, validating the experience of female sexual desire. Behn is the first British writer to give extended vocalisation to this experience, in what feels like an authentic manner; the domesticity of the private space of the woman's letter, written in her closet, generates both authenticity and titillation and provides a model for later writers such as Richardson. However, unlike Richardson's later enclosure of female desire within the formal closure of patriarchal marriage, Behn's female characters retain agency and voice outside such social and moral ideologies.

This is equally evident in the developmental voicing of a female gaze. Philander's very first letter is a paradigm of the early modern discourse of the libertine objectification of the

female body through the gaze (*Love Letters*, pp.11-2; and 15-9 and 34-6), a set of referents which recur throughout the three volumes as men describe and encounter women. Silvia's long ecstatic letter to Philander ('*After the Happy Night*', *Love Letters*, pp. 87-9) acts as a reprise of this language and of her responses to and engagement with it, including her knowledge of the fine line between fraternal and erotic love in a world where women are always subordinate to male desire(s). However, the letter also voices her anatomization of his body:

It was necessary that Philander shou'd be form'd... just as he is, that shape, that face, that height, that dear proportion; I would not have a feature, not a look, not a hair alter'd, just as thou art, thou art an Angel to me (p.89)

This learned objectification of the object of her desire informs Silvia's later encounters and descriptions of men (for example, in *Love Letters Part 3*, 386-8). Behn's narrated account of Miranda's obsession with Prince Tarquin in *The Fair Jilt* (particularly Behn 1993, 97-8) intersects sexual physical admiration with aspiration to royal status.

Behn dedicates *The History of the Nun*^{xv} to the Duchess of Mazarine, explicitly invoking a female readership: and her narrator moves straight into a reflection on women's compromised discursive and ideological positioning, in which a system of sexual grooming of young women by men inequitably establishes a poisonous sexual dynamics:

I verily believe, if it were searched into, we should find these frequent perjuries that pass in the world for so many gallantries only to be the occasion of so many unhappy marriages and the cause of all those misfortunes which are so frequent to the nuptialled pair. For not one of a thousand but, on his side, or on hers, has been perjured and broke vows to some fond believing wretch, whom they have abandoned and undone. What man but that does not boast of the numbers he has thus ruined, and who does not glory in his shameful triumph? Nay, what woman, almost, has not a pleasure in deceiving, taught perhaps, at first by some dear false one, who had fatally instructed her youth in an art she ever practised in revenge on all those she could be too hard for and conquer at their own weapons? For, without all dispute, women are by nature more constant and just than men, and did not their first lovers teach them the trick of change, they would be doves that would never quit their mate. (*History of the Nun*, pp.139-40)

The critique of the 'rhetorick of love', voiced in Silvia's letters, is shared by her alter-ego, the narrator (and author) of these other novels. Behn's anatomisation of contemporary erotic discourse as gendered, ideological and politicised is rendered through not only this kind of narratorial commentary, but through the formal reading experience. Radical sexual politics are articulated as a critical reading and interpretative process. Reading and writing is experimental discovery of new ideas and insights.

Feminist critics acknowledge Behn's novelistic experimentalism (Villegas Lopez 2012; Bachschieder 1993, and Ballaster 1992)^{xvi} in both form and content, although, by focussing on the novel as amatory fiction, they arguably write Behn into a corner where content (that is the erotic) still erases formal experimentation. Margaret Doody's re-calibration of the novel barely mentions Behn's work,^{xvii} and Carnell acknowledges Behn's experimentation but situates it firmly within a Tory political framework which runs the risk of reducing Behn's writing to that of a hack (Carnell 2006).^{xviii}

By contrast, I have shown that Behn's aesthetic experimentation with the emergent form of the novel, meta-fictionally foregrounds both formal and discursive representational modes. In doing so, Behn explores and tests representation and language in a way which is analogous to the data-driven experiments of her contemporary scientists in the Royal Society. As Philander self-consciously acknowledges, in his echoing of Orlando from *As You Like It*, when he says he will paste Silvia's name on all the trees in the forest: writing is a substitute for sex, and the exploration of sexual identity. Just as later feminists (such as Kristeva and Cixous) argued that 'writing from the body' against dominant patriarchal representational modes would challenge ideological and gendered politics, so Behn's meta-narratives about language, identity and sex alert us to the double standards of sexual representation via formal experimentation, whilst simultaneously finding a voice through which to articulate multiple (female) perspectives. Her prose arguably invents the dialogic novel and challenges genre and gender in both political and linguistic ways. Her erasure from literary history until the twentieth century models the critical history of radical women; even where she is revived or re-published Behn's work is analysed in terms of gender rather than her experimental innovations. This chapter has more radically argued

that the intrinsic connection between her philosophic libertarian stance, her gender politics, and her aesthetic expression should be more widely celebrated and acknowledged as foundational to the history of women's writing.

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ⁱ Across histories of political thought, literary developments and the history of science. See, Weber (1905); Watt (1957) pp.9-34; McKeon (1987).

ⁱⁱ See Webster's (1975, pp.1-27) re-inscription of Macaulay's (1849-61)'s original magisterial account, and McIntire's (2004, 205) critique of this stance.

ⁱⁱⁱ For Cavendish's clashes with the Royal Society see Day (2007, 422); and Cavendish's own formal experimentation see Ress (2003, 1-23).

^{iv} Merchant (1990); Fox Keller (1993); Scheibinger (1991); and Aughterson (2002).

^v For this consensus on the intersection between Behn's political beliefs and her dramatic and prose works, see Todd (1993 and 2004) and Pacheco (2002). For a more recent discussion of how Behn's political views were both more nuanced and subject to changing political debates see Villegas Lopez (2012).

^{vi} All references to *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* are from Behn, *The Works*, ed. Todd (1993), volume 2.

^{vii} Gervitz (2012) argues that formal experimentation in the *Love Letters* can be allied to changing notions of the self, emergent out of the Royal Society. Although I am greatly indebted to Gervitz's insights, I argue that Behn's experimentation is more broadly linguistic and formal than solely about point-of-view narratives. See also Villegas Lopez (2012) and Todd (1989).

^{viii} All references to *Oroonoko* are to *Oroonoko and Other Works*, edited by Salzman (Behn, 1993).

^{ix} See McKeon (1987) and Todd (1987, 139) 'the novel that women did write did not pursue verisimilitude for its own sake'.

^x Unbelievably, Behn's name does not appear in either McKeon (1987) or Watt (1957) in their accounts of the novel.

^{xi} All references to *The Fair Jilt* are to *Oroonoko and Other Works*, edited by Salzman (Behn, 1993).

^{xii} Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, credits Austen with its invention.

^{xiii} Kosoksy Sedgewick's (1985) study of how homosocial literary narratives echo and reinforce the homo-social political practices of aristocratic and bourgeois societies does not look back further than nineteenth-century novels.

^{xiv} Ballaster (1993, 33) argues that Behn and Manley's plots are 'written out of' the history of the novel in an attempt to make it 'respectable'.

^{xv} All references to *The History of the Nun* are to *Oroonoko and Other Works*, edited by Salzman (Behn, 1993).

^{xvi} Bachscheider (1993) argues that Behn discovers 'a new means of expression... a new way of viewing men, women and social relationships'; and that the Love Letters are 'dialogic and open ended....[in a novel] that could capture ambiguities and contradictions and construct a psychological realism that pleased people' (122); see also Ballaster (1992, 3, 33) and n. xiv.

^{xvii} Doody (1996) only six single brief references to Behn and her work in the index.

^{xviii} Carnell (2006, 44) writes: '[Behn's] experiments with fiction are crucial to understanding the formative stages of the British novel, *especially its connection to partisan politics*' (my emphasis).