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## “Reader, Take Notice”: Aphra Behn’s References and Self-Representation in the Epistle to the Reader in *The Dutch Lover*

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While Aphra Behn’s early life remains a mystery, her time in London and her allegiances are very well-documented. The persona she crafted throughout her whole career, which interacted with her readers in her paratexts, has, however, never been fully considered. Investigating the allusions and comments she makes in her epistles and prefaces can help fill in the blanks of what is known about her as well as revisit older ideas. This study explores and identifies the references she made and the communicative strategies she used in her epistle to the reader printed with *The Dutch Lover* (1673) and what they mean in terms of the self she crafted as a woman writing and publishing in Restoration London.

Keywords: Restoration drama; Aphra Behn; women writers; self-fashioning; seventeenth century; *The Dutch Lover*

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## “Reader, Take Notice”: Las referencias de Aphra Behn y la creación del yo en la epístola al lector impresa con *The Dutch Lover*

Aunque la infancia de Aphra Behn es un misterio, su vida en Londres y sus lealtades están bien documentadas. La imagen pública que cultivó a lo largo de toda su carrera en sus paratextos y que interactuaba con los lectores nunca ha sido analizada por completo. Investigar las alusiones y los comentarios que escribió en sus epístolas y prefacios puede ayudar a completar lo que se sabe sobre ella y revisar ideas ya establecidas. En este estudio se exploran las referencias que hizo y las estrategias comunicativas que utilizó en la epístola

al lector impresa con *The Dutch Lover* (1673) y qué significan en términos del “yo” que creó como escritora en el Londres de la Restauración.

Palabras clave: Teatro de la Restauración; Aphra Behn; escritoras; creación del yo; siglo XVII; *The Dutch Lover*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the Restoration, women playwrights faced widespread criticism from their contemporaries for many reasons, but one of the most repeated grounds on which they were censured was their lack of formal education and learning. In spite of her success during her lifetime, Aphra Behn was not spared this disapproval. In the early years of her career, she was the target of particularly scathing critique from her peers, which some scholars assert was because of her sex (Todd 1996, 2). I seek to illustrate how the epistle printed with *The Dutch Lover* in 1673 shows that Behn neither shrugged off nor embraced their criticism; instead, she firmly defended herself, not only explicitly but also implicitly via the vast knowledge she displayed in the text. In this defence, she crafted a self that was based on her literary, political and philosophical sympathies using a communicative strategy that appears unique but which was, in fact, more common than has previously been thought. In this article, I will also shed light on and analyse the references she makes throughout the epistle, some of which have been tentatively identified by Hughes (2000, 155-56).

Behn did not limit her defence strategies to the topos of female weakness so common among her predecessors and successors;<sup>1</sup> the way she approached negative comments is comparable to how some women writing scientific and technical texts were responding to critics of their own work (Alonso-Almeida and Álvarez-Gil 2021). It is important to highlight, however, that the epistle can and should be analysed in terms of its author being a woman, but not with the idea that she identified and crafted her self as *only* a woman: Behn differed from some of her female contemporaries in matters such as religion, politics and class, and her stance on these matters should not be omitted from this discussion. To do so would mean that the analysis could fall into categorising *all* women writers as a homogenous group, overlooking the disparities among them which were patent during their lifetimes (Roberts 2007, 264). Thus, an analysis of the references Behn makes in the epistle becomes essential to understanding her persona in 1673 because the allusions to ongoing affairs as well as philosophical and theological debates hint at her allegiances, beliefs and friendships.

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Boothby, in the dedicatory epistle attached to her tragicomedy *Marcellia, Or, the Treacherous Friend* (1670), along with the unknown “Ariadne,” who signs the preface in *She Ventures, and He Wins* (1696) and Mary Pix, in the dedication to *Ibrahim, the Thirteenth Emperour of the Turks* (1696), all used the topos of female weakness with differing degrees of sincerity (cf. EcheGARAY-MITAR 2022).

*The Dutch Lover* was premiered at Dorset Garden by the Duke's Company, probably on Thursday, February 6, 1673 (Van Lennep 1965, 1:203). When the play was printed a few months later,<sup>2</sup> Behn added the epistle to the reader, which has been recognised as an important piece of literary criticism (Leitch et al. 2001, 36; 388-90). Along with the preface to *The Luckey Chance* (1687), it has been examined in contrast to famous tracts on the same subject composed by male contemporaries (for example, John Dryden's *Of Dramatick Poesie, An Essay* and Thomas Shadwell's preface to *The Sullen Lovers*, both from 1668) as well as those by her predecessors, such as Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* (1595) (Finke 1993, 23-25; 31-39). Behn's epistle has been understood, in terms of the tone used by the author, in a consistent way by modern critics: some interpret the epistle as "witty" and filled "with savage irony" (Finke 1993, 33), characterised by "flirtation and irony" (Munns 1993, 44), while others read it as humorous (O'Donnell 2004, 7), as outright sarcastic (Salzman 2006, 202) or as an example of "comic seduction" (Gallagher 1994, 31).

Surprisingly, little interest, though, has been shown in female playwrights' prefaces and epistles (both dedicatory and to the reader) in general; in Behn's case, Salzman briefly acknowledges that paratexts can occasionally be helpful in gaining a sense of her "self-representation" (2006, 201). During the Restoration, these prefaces and epistles became a liminal space in which women playwrights could create a persona in anticipation of or in reaction to the criticism they received. This lack of analysis, and the ever-growing interest in women writers in general, is the framework within which this study is set. Centring on Behn in particular, her self was a greater site of contention than that of many of her peers: she had a very public profile in a world in which women were actively encouraged to lead private lives. The fact that she chose to publish her work in print instead of circulating it in manuscript form adds another layer to her contemporaries' critique of her, and it was one of the reasons she was unfavourably compared to Katherine Philips: by having her work printed, Behn made her mind public at a time when it was meant to be a woman's most private and closely guarded treasure. The construction of her self was, therefore, mediated by outer agents (mostly critics), who tended to focus on extraliterary aspects rather than on her talent, or lack thereof.

## 2. FORMAL CONSIDERATIONS

Upon first encountering the text, its length alone is remarkable—it takes up eight quarto pages in which Behn focuses on a wide range of topics in a seemingly disorganised manner. The fact that it is such an extensive epistle and the subjects she deals with are the very first means through which she crafted her self: she is an author who wishes to share her thoughts and opinions on current events with the reader, and she does

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<sup>2</sup> The play was entered in the *Term Catalogues* in the Michaelmas term, 1673 (Arber 1903, 3:151).

not care to follow the unwritten rule that she (as a woman) should not publish a text dealing with scientific, political and philosophical matters (Skouen and Stark 2015, 13). I would suggest that the length, regardless of the content of the epistle, works as an indication of Behn's self; she was someone with much to say on a wide range of topics, and she believed her opinions were valid and worth expressing. What is more, she did not apologise for expressing them or even acknowledge in any way that she should not have done so. None of her contemporaries (Frances Boothby and Elizabeth Polewhele) or the playwrights of the subsequent generation (Mary Pix, Delarivier Manley, Catharine Trotter Cockburn, the unknown "Ariadne" and Susanna Centlivre) ever matched the length of this epistle in their own paratexts; indeed, the only writers to equal her were John Dryden (particularly those paratexts printed with *Amboyna* and *The Assignation, or, Love in a Nunnery*, both from 1673) and Thomas Shadwell (*The Sullen Lovers*, 1668). The value of Behn's epistle, I believe, is not only due to her discussion of drama or her complaint about her situation as a woman in the Restoration theatrical world—the two most frequent descriptions of the text. There have been few in-depth analyses of the references Behn makes in the epistle and what they mean in terms of the creation of her persona. Hughes is perhaps the only expert (excluding scholarly editions) to have determined the objects of a number of the allusions in the epistle, although some of his identifications can be disputed.

The style of the epistle seems, initially, unusual for one written by a woman; as Alonso Almeida and Álvarez-Gil have shown (2021, 144-45), Behn was not, nevertheless, the only woman using this style: some of her contemporaries who published scientific texts wrote in a similar manner. She was, however, the only female playwright writing in such a direct and assertive style, reminiscent of the "plain style" advocated by Thomas Sprat in his *History of the Royal Society* (1667) for all scientific texts published under the aegis of the Society (Nate 2015, 77). The epistle is also packed with learned allusions: in it, Behn displays her extensive knowledge of current matters pertaining to the Royal Society and London life in general. She not only describes ongoing controversies surrounding members and non-members, but she also takes sides. While disclaiming that she is an authoritative voice in the ongoing debates—for example, "I have often heard (and read) how much the World was anciently oblig'd to [...] Science, which my want of letters makes me less assur'd of than others" (1996, 160 ll. 33-35)<sup>3</sup>—, she proves that she was as up to date as any of the men participating in the very public disputes to which she refers (Runge 1997, 131).

The beginning of the epistle printed with *The Dutch Lover* is quite exceptional in the teasing manner in which Behn addresses the reader, suggesting that she capitalised on her gender to ingratiate herself with them in the context of the exchanges Payne has described (1991). Payne has asserted that in this period, the symbolic capital of the sexuality of a woman like Behn is connected to the prejudice associated with women

<sup>3</sup> All quotes are from Janet Todd's 1996 edition of *The Dutch Lover* in volume 5 of *The Works*.

playwrights. Behn was certainly not looking for monetary compensation or protection from readers, since this was a more common aim in epistle dedicatories; she was only seeking their favour. She clearly gendered the reader as male in opposition to herself by using flirtatious (traditionally identified as feminine) phrasing, playing on the tone expected from a late-seventeenth-century woman. It was a coy strategy to attract the reader's attention through extremely flattering adjectives, which escalate hyperbolically from the simple "Good" to the excessive "Sugar-candied" (160 n. 1.). While the address is certainly overly familiar and uncommon, categorising it as "inappropriate" (Munns 1993, 45) creates the wrong impression of Behn's intentions and context. This greeting was a natural consequence and feature of the Restoration literary world, where wit and transgression were the norm, particularly in the libertine circles in which Behn moved. This lively address, from a woman writer to a reader who is presumed to be a man, mirrors the witty repartee frequently performed by what John Harrington Smith has called "gay couples" in Restoration comedies (1948, 47). Behn would have certainly been familiar with this convention, for she wrote several plays in which there is at least one "gay couple," including *The Dutch Lover*. By 1673, the convention had been firmly established: in the thirteen years after 1660, many works by the most relevant playwrights had featured a "gay couple" (Smith, 58-71).

Although Behn's humorous tone continues in the first lines of the epistle, the coquettish style of the address is immediately replaced with a more direct (and aggressive) approach—in fact, she appears to suggest that the reader is not worthy of being greeted so warmly: "(Which I think is more than any one has call'd you yet)" (160 l. 1). As Doody explains, women writers in the Restoration could write aggressively provided they kept "anger under control, to make power-moves while looking cool" (2004, 66), which is certainly the case in these first lines of the text. It is obvious that Behn expected the reader to understand her lively remark by stating that she "must have a word or two" with them before they go on to read the play or "Treatise" as she humorously terms it (160 l. 2). The use of this word to describe her comedy has a twofold purpose: firstly, to extend the wit of the address into the body of the epistle, and secondly, to mock the proliferation of treatises that appeared in the years following the establishment of the Royal Society.<sup>4</sup> Although some allowances must be made for men of different backgrounds and occupations, it is very likely that the private library of the reader that Behn is addressing contained mostly "serious" books written by men; as Pearson explains, "[a]t least half of [the] contents [of a private library] would probably comprise what we would call theology of some shape or form, [...] and would embrace some coverage of history, literature, geography and travel, classics, science, natural history, medicine, and law" (2012, sec. Contents).

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<sup>4</sup> Over 130 books containing the word "treatise" and any of its variants—such as "treatice" or "treyse"—in the title were published between 1670 and 1673 according to *Early English Books Online*.

### 3. APHRA BEHN'S LEARNED REFERENCES

It is after this playful beginning that Behn undertakes to demonstrate the knowledge she has acquired. In contrast to her use of the word “treatise” to describe *The Dutch Lover*, Behn insists that she has not deceived the reader in any way: the title page clearly and accurately shows that the work they are reading is a comedy. To further illustrate this point, she proceeds to allude to the title pages of other works that would have been very easily recognisable to her audience; these references support the creation of the persona of a woman who kept abreast with scientific, philosophical, theological and political issues in the years preceding the publication of the epistle. Behn's allusions to title pages are: “Immortality of the Soul,” “the Mystery of Godliness,” and “Ecclesiastical Policie” (160 ll. 8-9). Yet she did not stop at the title pages of other works. Behn explicitly acknowledges the content of these and other well-known works: “Apocryphal midnight tales,” “If I had only prov'd in Folio that *Apollonius* was a naughty knave,” and “the worst principles transcrib'd out of the peremptory and ill natur'd [...] Doctor of Malmsbury undigested and ill manag'd by a silly, saucy, ignorant, impertinent, ill educated Chaplain” (160 ll. 10, 13, 14-16). In just thirteen lines, Behn exhibits her awareness of the controversies going on in London and beyond between members of the Royal Society and free thinkers, and even among members of the Royal Society themselves.

Behn's reader would have immediately identified the first two works listed above: *The Immortality of the Soul* (1659) and *An Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness* (1660), by Cambridge Platonist Henry More, whose reputation within the intellectual world of the Restoration was already well established by 1673 (Reid 2012, 7). It is not a kind allusion, however—she scorns the whole content of these two texts by reducing them to two disdainful statements. The first one alludes to *The Immortality*: “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)” (160 ll. 9-11). Such a specific reference to axiom IX of *The Immortality*, by mentioning the concepts of “indiscerpibility” and “essential spissitude,” demonstrates that Behn read beyond the title page, even if she did not hold a high opinion of the contents of the work. It is evident that she believes these two concepts—crucial to More's work—are empty of any real meaning, positioning herself against More's criticism of Hobbesian materialism. The second affirmation mocks *An Explanation*: “If I had only prov'd in Folio that Apollonius was a naughty Knave” (160 l. 13); she reduces More's complex and long text (it takes up 546 folio pages), where he explains his theological latitudinarianism at length, to the assertion that in it he only declared that “Apollonius was a naughty Knave.” Apollonius of Tyana was a wandering Neopythagorean ascetic orator who lived in the first century CE. As Hughes has explained, in *An Explanation*, More rejects the parallels that had been drawn since antiquity between Apollonius and Christ in order to “discredit the latter,” and defends “the superiority of Christ to Apollonius,” thus proving that the philosopher was “a naughty knave” (2000, 156). As

superficial as the reference appears to be, it indicates that Behn was very familiar with the text, as otherwise she would not have been able to oversimplify it in this manner.

There are two initial candidates for the other title page Behn alludes to. The first is Robert South's *Ecclesiasticall Policy the Best Policy: Or Religion the Best Reason of State*, the second sermon printed in his *Interest deposed and truth restored, or, A word in season delivered in two sermons* (1660, 1668), where, in spite of beginning towards the middle of the work, *Ecclesiasticall Policy* has its own title page. And Hughes has suggested (2000, 155) as the alternative Samuel Parker's *A Discourse of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1670; although according to Parkin [2004] it appeared in 1669).

Robert South was a very prominent figure in the first decades of the Restoration; by the time Behn mentions him in the epistle, he had been the public orator of Oxford University for thirteen years and had recently received a canonship of Christ Church at the same institution. The other contender was also a widely known figure in 1673. Samuel Parker's *Discourse* created controversy and, despite his attempts to make his position clear, his critics accused him of agreeing with Hobbes's philosophy (Parkin 2004). He defended himself by disparaging nonconformists in *A Defence and Continuation of the Ecclesiastical Politie* (1671). In 1672-1673, he was attacked by Andrew Marvell in his celebrated *The Rehearsal Transpros'd*—and Parker replied without delay. This polemic indicates that Parker was a prominent figure in the intellectual world of 1673 England, making him a strong candidate for the reference of "Ecclesiastical Policie" even if he did not as yet hold positions as significant as Robert South's. I would suggest, however, that Behn alludes to Robert South rather than Samuel Parker for one main reason: as Griggs (2004) has noted, South was John Wallis's "fellow nemesis of Thomas Hobbes," which confirms that there was an important enmity between both men.

Following the identification of South's text as the object of her censure, it is feasible to assume that Behn crafted her self by aligning with Thomas Hobbes and against all his detractors, whom she continued ridiculing in the lines following her scornful remarks about More and South. Even if Hobbes's materialism did not appear to justify "sexual hedonism," it "seemed to support libertinism," which was "[t]he ideology to which Behn was most attracted" and which became one of the most influential ideologies in England during the Restoration (Staves 2004, 20). With the reference to Hobbes, she thus sides with him as well as with the ideology of libertinism, and against what adherents to this philosophy called "religious superstition." The implications of this positioning, apart from philosophical, can be said to be political and religious. By sympathising with Hobbes, she implicitly shows that she is an ally of the royal court and an "unabashed Tory" (O'Donnell 1989, 344).

Behn associated Hobbes's detractors with Joseph Glanvill, whose extremely popular *A Philosophical Endeavour towards the Defense of the being of Witches and Apparitions* (1666), she sarcastically defines as "Apocryphal midnight tales cull'd out of the choicest insignificant Authors" (160 ll. 12-13). Her quick dismissal of Glanvill's work contrasts with the success of the text: the work was reissued twice,

in 1667 and 1668, in two subsequent editions under different titles due to high demand.<sup>5</sup> The congenial reference to Hobbes—“the peremptory and ill natur’d (though prettily ingenious) Doctor of Malmsbury” (160 ll. 14-15)—is inscribed in her severe description of Savilian professor of mathematics at Oxford and royal chaplain John Wallis, who she believed to be “silly, saucy, ignorant, impertinent, ill educated” (160 ll. 16-17). By 1673 Hobbes and Wallis had been immersed in a controversy for almost twenty years. The latest episode Behn would have been aware of was from 1672, when Hobbes anonymously published *Lux mathematica Excussa collisionibus Johannis Wallieii*, a text outlining the history of the controversy and in which Hobbes appointed himself the winner of each and every dispute. Wallis swiftly replied in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society on two separate occasions: in August and October 1672. Behn’s diatribe against everyone but Hobbes abruptly ends with a reminder to the reader that by labelling her text a comedy on the title page she has not deceived them.

Although what follows these initial references is perhaps the most famous section of this epistle (Behn’s discussion of theatre and its function), there are still some learned allusions to other contemporary philosophers that I have found interspersed through the rest of the epistle. She twice references the famous theologian and natural philosopher John Wilkins. The first instance is an indirect comment when she addresses the concept of “useful knowledge”: “I have heard some wise men say, that no considerable part of useful knowledge was this way communicated” (160-61 ll. 35-37). This concept is connected to the Royal Society and the belief its members held that empirical science should be applicable—and thus useful—to everyday life. Hunter explains that possibly “the stress on utility had an [...] emphasis on likely tangible benefits being intended to justify broader intellectual concerns to a hostile public,” since the “new science” was not free from controversy and was subject to criticism on account of its “trivial and unimportant” quality (1981, 90). In spite of this being a relevant idea to all members of the Royal Society, it was highlighted by Wilkins in his works, particularly in *A discourse concerning a new world & another planet in 2 bookes* (1640). In it he rejected the authority of biblical and classical sources for natural philosophers in favour of “fresh experiments and new discoveries” because he considered that he and his fellow members of the Royal Society were “the Fathers, and of more Authority than former Ages; because wee have the advantage of more time than they had, and Truth (wee say) is the Daughter of Time” (1640, 7). A few lines after this reference Behn explicitly mentions him with a certain amount of admiration: “And it was smartly said [...] by a late learned Doctor” (161 ll. 50-51). Behn shows, once again, that she was very aware of the ongoing philosophical debates by stating that Wilkins tried to convince “the fondest and the lewdest crew about this Town [...] of the necessity and truth of our Religion” (161 ll.

<sup>5</sup> The second edition was *Some Philosophical Considerations Touching the Being of Witches and Witchcraft* and the third edition was titled *A Blow at Modern Sadducism* (Burns 2008).



49, 53-54). Behn's sympathy for Wilkins may have been aided by the fact that he wrote books on natural philosophy in English rather than elitist Latin (a language she had no command of); she echoed his work later in her career by translating Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1688) and *Histoire des oracles* (1687) into English (Cottegnies 2004, 227).

The last two men that Behn alludes to and who were part of the public learned debate are Thomas Sprat and John Eachard. Sprat is not mentioned by name, but Behn groups him with Wilkins among the "wise men" cited above; it is clear that Sprat is included when she states that, apart from useful knowledge being transmitted in poetry, it could have and had "serv'd to propagate so many idle superstitions, as all the benefits it hath or can be guilty of" (161 ll. 37-38). In *The history of the Royal-Society of London* (1667), Sprat explains that in Ancient Greece, "the first Masters of knowledge [...] were as well *Poets* as *Philosophers* [who] set [their own opinions] off with the mixture of Fables, and the ornaments of Fancy" (1667, 6; italics in the original). He also wrote that it was time to replace the fables and fictions of the poets with natural knowledge which is achieved empirically and expressed simply "by those Ornaments which are *Tru* and *Real* in themselves" (1667, 414; italics in the original). Some lines after the second reference to Wilkins, Behn praises John Eachard, whose works were published between 1670 and 1673, the style he employed in them earning him the respect of his audience. Behn's comments demonstrate that she was familiar with his most renowned work, *The Grounds and Occasions of the Contempt of the Clergy and Religion Enquired into* (1670). In this text, Eachard attacked members of the country clergy and claimed, in witty prose, that "the religion which they represented [was] held in general disesteem because of the poverty and ignorance" they displayed (Kramer 1986, 42). In the epistle, Behn writes:

But I'll proceed no farther in [the] character [of those who are 'the most assiduous disciples of the stage' [...]] and who make the 'fondest and the lewdest crew about this town'], because that miracle of Wit (in spight of Academick frippery) the mighty Eachard hath already done it to my satisfaction; and whoever undertakes a Suppliment to any thing he hath discourst, had better for their reputation be doing nothing (161 ll. 60-64).

The allusion to Eachard's work evokes the lively style he was known for—despite dealing with members of the religious community, he composed his work in an accessible style that was attractive to the general reader (Kramer 1986, 52).

A lack of academic learning was one of the main reasons women writers were frequently criticised, so it is not surprising that Aphra Behn made a wide range of learned references as an implicit response. The implications of a woman commenting on debates in which men were involved, however, do not indicate she was in fact aligned with either side of the debates. She engages with the discourse in an epistle to the reader, which is a liminal space—a space like the one she occupied.

#### 4. BEHN AS A LITERARY CRITIC AND ADVOCATE FOR WOMEN'S LEARNING

Having detailed the unmistakable as well as the more obscure references, I would like to touch on the section in which Behn creates her self as a literary critic. While this is a section that has been closely scrutinised in recent years owing to the number of dramatic allusions it contains as well as Behn's own assessment of drama, this section has not been analysed in terms of how she constructs her identity. It would be a mistake to discuss these references as separate from each other since, linked, they aided Behn in creating a persona defined by the overall discussion on drama and her views on its function and rules. She undertook the task of opposing those who defended the Horatian maxim that plays, in addition to providing "divertisement" to "wise men" (162 l. 91), were "intended for the exercising of mens [...] understandings" (162 ll. 79-80). This is a clear allusion to playwrights like Thomas Shadwell, with whom Behn evidently disagreed. In his preface to *The Humourists* (1671), Shadwell stated his belief in the didactic quality of drama, but especially comedy over tragedy; this contrasts with Behn's position in this epistle: "I studied only to make this [play] as entertaining as I could" (162 l. 93)—obviously she did not hold a high opinion of those who "do discourse as formallie about the rules of it, as if 'twere the grand affair of humane life" (162 ll. 91-92).

Behn reveals that she was aware of the current proto-feminist debate regarding women's education and intellectual abilities by acknowledging that "[p]lays have no great room for that which is mens great advantage over women, that is learning" (162 ll. 118-19). She concedes that men had the advantage over their female peers in terms of learning because they had access to formal education. However, erudite women were not unheard of: the same year that *The Dutch Lover* appeared in print, Bathsua Makin's increasingly popular *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen* was published. Makin, a scholar with extensive training in classical and modern languages, had been the tutor of Princess Elizabeth and other aristocratic ladies and she corresponded in Greek with fellow intellectual Anna Maria van Schurman. Her *Essay*, "a lively and amusing defence of women, [and] a catalogue of learned women throughout history," is "certainly the first essay by an Englishwoman defending women and their abilities in the classroom" (Teague 2004), but it is matched in sentiment by Behn in this epistle. This points to the fact that Behn's text was not an isolated defence of women's scholarly abilities. Her advocacy was part of a network of women who were beginning to argue in favour of their intellectual skills and claim a place in the public spheres that had traditionally and almost exclusively belonged to men—chiefly due to "[t]he feeling that publication of one's work symbolically violated feminine modesty by exposing private thoughts to the world" (Goreau 1985, 15). In this epistle, Behn presents her learning and knowledge as two sides of the same coin: one side is the evidence of what she said, and the other is what she implied by her words. Both sides, together, show that far from being ignorant and finding concepts too hard to understand, she was extremely knowledgeable on current matters and could participate in the debate.

To vindicate the place of the female playwright, Behn aligned herself with William Shakespeare and implicitly became his literary “daughter.” In the epistle, she compared his theatrical success with that of the more learned Ben Jonson to conclude that formal education (to which she had no access) was not a wholly reliable criterion when judging the achievements of a playwright. Shakespeare was less learned than Jonson, who famously wrote that the Bard had “small Latine and lesse Greeke” in the First Folio. At this stage of her career, it seems to have been an unwise action because *The Dutch Lover* was not a success. Yet her words associating herself with Shakespeare did forecast her future career as a playwright: after a hiatus of three years, her only tragedy *Abdelazer* and the comedy *The Town-Fopp* premiered in 1676 and her highly successful comedies *The Rover* (1677) and *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678) followed suit. Still, the influence of Shakespeare and Jonson in Aphra Behn’s writing is not limited to her claim of having similar learning to Shakespeare. Williams has asserted that “many of the features which Restoration and later critics considered typical of Jonson appear in [Behn’s] works,” making her an “honorary Son of Ben” (2003, 93) in stark contrast to this text, where she crafted her self as a “Daughter of Shakespeare” (or “Sister” as Williams suggests). By claiming a place among Shakespeare’s literary heirs, she creates the opportunity for women in the future to do the same—either directly or indirectly as her own heiresses.

Her persona as Shakespeare’s literary heiress also functions as an obvious opposition to contemporary male playwrights whom she dismissed as members of “Jonson’s sect.” These men, unlike Behn and Shakespeare, had a formal education—most had attended public schools and university. More specifically, she referred to Thomas Shadwell and the description in his preface to *The Sullen Lovers* of how he punctiliously applied the three rules of unity (time, place and action) when writing the play. Behn positioned herself by defending, once more, women’s intellectual abilities against those who suggested that they would not understand these classical dramatic precepts: “Then for their musty rules of Unity [...] if they meant any thing, they are enough intelligible, and as practible by a woman” (163 ll. 133-34). The fact that she spoke mockingly of the unities of time, place and action does not hide her familiarity with these classical principles, and her use of the adjective “musty” further implies that she supported a more updated view of dramatic rules in opposition to older (i.e., “mustier”) rules.

Shakespeare, Jonson and Shadwell are not the only literary figures to whom Behn alludes in the epistle. She refers to her friend John Dryden, calling him “our most unimitable Laureat” (162 l. 131), as well as to specific works by Jonson and Shakespeare. For example, she writes of Jonson’s *Catiline His Conspiracy* (1611): “[Jonson’s education being ‘but Grammar high’ was] sufficient indeed to rob poor Salust of his best Orations”; the other plays she mentions are Jonson’s “the Alchymist,” and Shakespeare’s “Harry the Fourth” (162 ll. 123, 127-28). One last relevant statement on drama in the epistle is “I have seen a man [...] sit [...] for almost three hours at the Alchymist”; apart from being very useful for theatre historians of this period as it confirms the length of plays,

it demonstrates that she belonged with her contemporaries by revealing she was no stranger to the conventions of the world in which she was claiming a place.

Before proceeding with an analysis of the self that Behn crafts in this epistle to the reader, I would like to draw attention to one more non-dramatic reference she introduces in the text that indicates she was acquainted with the literary scene in general. She states: “For he that is the Knight of the Play, no sublunary feats must serve his Dulcinea” (162 ll. 74-75)—Don Quixote’s beloved was easily recognised by the time *The Dutch Lover* was printed, along with her name, which had come to mean “a lady love, a sweetheart” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It is not surprising to find a mention to Miguel de Cervantes’s work, as the English translations of *Don Quixote* remained extremely popular throughout the seventeenth century. This reference takes on another level of meaning, however, when the reader becomes aware that the love interest of the hero of the play is, like Dulcinea, a Spanish lady.

The literary references Aphra Behn makes in this text prove that, far from being a woman with little learning, she was well-versed in the literature and culture of both England and the continent; she also demonstrates that she was aware of authors from classical antiquity. Her boldness in claiming a place among Shakespeare’s and Jonson’s literary heirs is a testament to her trust in her own abilities as a writer.

##### 5. APHRA BEHN’S SELF IN THE EPISTLE TO THE READER

Having shown the broad scope of the learning Behn displayed in this text and how it aided her in crafting her persona, I would now like to approach the epistle in terms of Patricia Pender’s persuasive arguments in *Early Modern Women’s Writing and the Rhetoric of Modesty*, and particularly what she calls “Authorial Alibis.” The expectations of female modesty during the Restoration were by no means the same as those for men; famously—or perhaps *infamously*—many high-ranking men of the king’s royal court were widely considered to be libertines, for example, the well-known Lord Rochester and Sir Charles Sedley. While it was scandalous but acceptable for these men to behave the way they did, they were protected by both their status and sex. It was unthinkable, though, for women to act in a similar manner, as they were still supposed to observe virtues that were regarded as inherently female, modesty in particular.

In the epistle, Behn used several strategies that can be initially categorised as simple “modesty,” but which bear further consideration. Pender accurately describes the issues that this modesty, present in female-authored texts, raise. She asserts that the disclaimer of authorship by early modern women is usually seen as proof that they had internalised the dominant commands to silence. She warns, however, of what she terms “the logic of causality”: if it is not further explored, it could potentially “perpetuate the ‘silencing’ of early modern women writers, by continuing to underrate their considerable rhetorical ability and agency” (2013, 6)—a rhetorical ability and agency that can certainly be ascribed to Aphra Behn in this epistle. I would like to

note that the use of modesty tropes by early modern women is markedly different from that of their male counterparts, but, as Pender has shown, this is not for any “essential, biological, or even political reasons [...], but because their *historical* position placed women in profoundly different relationships with discourses of authorship and modesty in the early modern period” (2013, 11; italics in the original).

While Aphra Behn did not deal with this expected criticism like her contemporaries Frances Boothby and Elizabeth Polewhele (cf. Echegaray-Mitar 2022), the three of them did all face obstacles as women writing for the London stage in the early 1670s. The most important, which they anticipated, was that their work would be criticised on account of their gender. In fact, Behn complains in the epistle that during the premiere, a critic (who she describes in rather scathing terms) opened “that which serves it for a mouth, out issued such a noise as this to those that sate about it, that they were to expect a woful Play, God damn him, for it was a womans” (162 ll. 106-108). She dismisses this critic’s comments, insisting that he surely picked it up from someone else: “for Creatures of his size of sence talk without all imagination, such scraps as they pick up from other folks” (162 ll. 110-11), which insinuates that all detractors were parroting similar criticism, and she thus received it with little surprise.

To understand the process by which an author creates a self, it is important to consider their wider social, political and economic context, since these can be useful tools to display a persona. In the introduction to his monograph *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1983), Stephen Greenblatt discussed the ten conditions for self-fashioning in the case studies he worked with and which can be extended to early modern writing in general. In the context of the present analysis, the most relevant way Behn’s self is crafted is in opposition to something hostile or strange—that is, the unfavourable views some parts of society held of women publishing their works and of them becoming playwrights. The creation of a persona in literature is invariably done by means of language, and this can unquestionably be observed in Behn’s words in this epistle. The way in which she presented herself as a confident woman who believed she deserved the same consideration as her fellow male playwrights is reinforced by the curt farewell she writes: “sans farther compliment” (163 l. 161). This leave-taking contrasts strongly with the opening line of the epistle and which, as Runge has said, is a feature of “the decorous and highly formal codes of gallantry that characterize most communication between the sexes” in Restoration London (1997, 134). Having demonstrated her learning, she no longer needed to cajole the reader, as was expected of her.

The wide variety of learned allusions Behn introduces in her epistle is central to her 1673 self. Behn created a persona in opposition to the prejudice she expected to encounter in the future and which she had actually received for *The Dutch Lover*, highlighting that the main objection critics raised was the fact that she was a woman writing for the theatre. Fitzmaurice contends that the greatest issue was not that women wrote but that they had their works published and staged (1990, 202). Since women who had their work published transgressed the expectations of female virtue

(and modesty in particular), Pender's analysis of the rhetoric of female modesty is particularly pertinent. This is what Behn confronted when she wrote and published *The Dutch Lover*. The epistle to the reader appended to this comedy serves as a very strong counterargument against the charge of women's lack of learning. By means of the persona that she creates in the text, she asserts her right to write, publish and have her work staged.

Since *The Dutch Lover* was Behn's first play to be printed with a paratext of this kind, it is an ideal starting point to trace the self she crafted throughout her career. In a future analysis, later epistles and prefaces can be examined to determine whether this self remained the same or whether it evolved over time—particularly in view of her later success. I would argue, furthermore, that the self she created in this epistle cannot be studied along with the persona she may have presented to the theatre audience through prologues and epilogues. This is because, firstly, the stage and the playbook are entirely different sites and their audiences (even if they were sometimes the same person) experienced the texts differently; secondly, some of the prologues and epilogues were contributions by some of her friends. Moreover, the plays which were printed with an epistle dedicatory should not be forgotten when examining the ways Behn shaped her self,<sup>6</sup> since by making the conscious decision to dedicate the work to a specific individual she was already hinting at her persona. In this sense, it would be of particular interest to examine the epistle to Nell Gwyn printed with *The Feign'd Curtizans; or, A Nights Intrigue* (1679).

In 1673, Behn presents a self to the reader that does not follow expectations of female modesty either in words or in deeds. Her long text and learned references provide an indication of the way she perceived herself and how she wanted to be perceived by the reader. She created a self that was knowledgeable about philosophical matters as well as literary and cultural issues, but was patently a woman. Her references to her sex in the epistle prove that, far from attempting to conceal or excuse herself because of it, she was aware of the limitations that were rampant for a woman in Restoration London. In spite of these limitations, in 1673 she crafted a self that would prove to her peers that she belonged in the Restoration theatre world.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The epistles printed with *The Widdow Ranter* (1690) and *The Younger Brother* (1696) can be omitted from this discussion because they were posthumously printed and the dedications were not written by Behn.

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