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Sexuality as a Guide to Ethics: God and the Variable Body in English literature

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Introduction: Variability and Equality

When the Government's Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill received Royal Assent on 17 July 2013, having been passed by both Houses of Parliament, it looked as though it might have been an important step forward towards equality for homosexuals. But when, on 24 March 2014, our Prime Minister began to trumpet his vision of equality in the wake of the first gay weddings, the BBC reported that while

David Cameron said the move sent a message that people were now equal "whether gay or straight", ... some religious groups remain opposed.¹

The Church of England, which was effectively established as the country's state church in 1662 with the imposition of the *Book of Common Prayer* upon all of its congregations, was one of the religious groups that opposed the Bill. And the state church continues to oppose it. On Friday, 17 January 2017, *The Independent* reported:

Church of England bishops have rejected the idea of changing its opposition to same-sex marriage.

The House of Bishops said there is "little support for changing the Church of England's teaching on marriage" that it is between one man and one woman.

The Rt Rev Graham James, Bishop of Norwich, said at a press conference that the church should not "adapt its doctrine to the fashions of any particular time".²

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-26793127> [Accessed 17 January 2017].

² <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/church-of-england-reject-same-sex-marriage-house-of-bishops-general-opposition-homosexuality-lgbt-a7549906.html> [Accessed 3 March 2017]

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The discrepancy between the Government of England's view of marriage and the Church of England's view of marriage is suggested in this statement to be due to their different roles: the government steers the nation through the changing fashions, while the church remains true to the nation's core beliefs. What this paper will explore is how neither of these positions serves or reflects the needs and desires of the individuals who make up our nation. Did David Cameron really believe that gay marriage would increase equality, or was it a move to increase the popularity of the Tory party among the growing number of openly homosexual couples, or was gay marriage no more than an artefact of the coalition with the Liberal Democrats: a convenient shift in fashion which we no longer need to associate with the party's typical right wing goals? And at the same time I wonder whether Bishop Graham remembers he is a representative of a church which chose to separate itself from the Roman Church in 1534, and "adapt its doctrines to the fashion" of protestantism, which the Church of England's own website records:

At the Reformation the Western Church became divided between those who continued to accept Papal authority and the various Protestant churches that repudiated it. The Church of England was among the churches that broke with Rome.³

Despite its obduracy about same-sex marriage, in January 2017, at the same time as rejecting it, the Church of England Bishops claimed in "A new report, following two years of internal discussion, ...[that] the church needs to adopt a fresh tone and culture of welcome and support".⁴

This can only be a good idea. In the summer of 2013 I was denounced from the pulpit of my central London parish church for writing a book subtitled "Towards a twenty-first century Homosexual Theology for the Anglican Church." I was singled out in his sermon by the priest in charge and criticised for arguing against the unchanging rules of the *Book of Common Prayer*, which was waved at my back as I tapped my way out of the church where I was not welcome. Hurt and angry it took me a while to recall that the priest was blaming me for the

³ <https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/history/detailed-history.aspx> [Accessed 3 March 2017]

⁴ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/church-of-england-reject-same-sex-marriage-house-of-bishops-gene-lift-opposition-homosexuality-lgbt-a7549906.html> [Accessed 3 March 2017]

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fact that the elected tail had just wagged the unelected moral guide-dog of the blind Houses of Parliament to vote down the bishops and bring in gay marriage. What right had I to question the *Book of Common Prayer*? What right had I to challenge the acceptance of changing fashions in religious belief which that book heralded in its imposition upon all English parishes? However, what actually put the twist in my smile was that marriage as a gay estate is one to which I am ambivalent since I do not believe in equality.

In *Being the Body of Christ*, the book that caused the rumpus in my church, I argued the case that the dominantly heterosexual world had and still has things to learn from its homosexual members if it is to survive. I have always been homosexual, but was then newly blind. What my new gift taught me was that accepting God's gifts may be meant to challenge us. Furthermore, I argued that a catholic church, which the Church of England labels itself in the daily repetition of the Apostles' Creed, ought to welcome all people with all their gifts in all its roles. God did not create a fashion for one set of sexual behaviours to be preferred over others, humans did. God created us all, just as we are and always have been. When two people look at each other and recognise what they both are, the revelation of a possible "us" occurs like a third person that is made up of neither one objectifying the other nor vice versa. The "us" is irreducible to the wishes of either one, and is rather a moment of mutual respect in relation to each other, overseen by God. If this description appears to encompass falling in love, it is also the basis of a society made up of individuals. Falling in love and loving one another as Christ taught us are by no means the same thing, but they are not all that different. Loving one another as Christ taught us might as easily be described using the same words I chose above:

When two people look at each other and recognise what they both are, the revelation of a possible "us" occurs like a third person that is made up of neither one objectifying the other nor vice versa. The "us" is irreducible to the wishes of either one, and is rather a moment of mutual respect in relation to each other, overseen by God.

In my understanding, the wanting for there to be an "us" is not guided by physical lust. Indeed, one might ask: how few times do we look at others in that way? More often, we just want to get on. Perhaps we want to pass one another on a pavement without bumping one another into the traffic. And this requires an "us" in the form of a joint agreement to pass carefully. Now I

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carry a white stick, you have to look as I cannot. You have to make all the moves, but you do so as I do not know how best to help us pass one another. You know this because of my white stick. We are not equal to each other; we are not the same as each other. You make allowances for me and are happy to do so. It makes you feel good about yourself, and it makes me feel happy to be blind so that a tiny moment of passing on the street can be focussed into an “us.” An “us” that is remembered by both of us (the person who stopped their car on Romsey Road yesterday so I could cross, you remember, so do I). This meeting of individuals is an ethical imperative, which Martin Buber called “I-thou” and Emmanuel Levinas the “face-to-face”. If this is so in the little meetings, then it is more true of sexuality.

My sexuality is the thing closest to myself in my closest dealings with another person: it creates me as consciously myself in tension with another person who I can neither reduce to myself nor understand as absolutely different from myself: who is “the same only different” from me. And in the same way as a blind person passes a sighted person on the street, if my sexuality is not congruent with yours, we should pass one another carefully so neither of us gets hurt. Just as we want the best for our partner in life, so we also want the best for everyone else who is our neighbour. It makes us both feel good about ourselves.

And this is why ethical development has spread throughout our community, throughout history and still spreads today. It is an unstoppable movement which has, for example, brought me from the decision to disguise my homosexuality at the University of Winchester when I began to work there twenty-five years ago, through the faltering steps of planning, then the running of an undergraduate module called Literature, Sexuality and Morality. It should be no surprise then, that there was no question that I should add my name to the out list of members of staff on the university website. What I want to make clear, however, is that none of these actions or decisions was due to an increased sense of equality. I am not equal with the staff members on the out list who do not label themselves “gay” or “homosexual”. They may call themselves “heterosexual ally” or “supporter of the LGBT community” but as these labels suggest they might be heterosexual they are not equal to me. But nor am I different from them as we are all staff members at the University of Winchester, working towards the goal of better education for our students.

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Separating the terms ‘equality’ and ‘difference’ just does not capture what is going on even in something as relatively innocuous as an out-list. Instead, what the example of the out-list suggests is the recognition of variability, the co-terminal knowledge of sameness and difference (“the same only different”) that animates sexuality, the foundation of self-as-consciousness, which consciousness also grounds the ethical imperative in our relationships with others that do not become sexual. This is the basis of variability, which, I believe, guides us in all our dealings with all other people.

Variability inverts the expectation that morality should be fixed and stable, and is more flexible than laws that change depending on the vagaries of politics. But it is not completely situational and not at all relative.⁵ If we always begin with the knowledge that the person with whom we are interacting is “the same only different” from us, we begin from the point of view that we cannot expect to reduce them to our viewpoint. (Believe me, I am a blind man). Our neighbour will always exceed our expectations, and given that fact, which comes with the concomitant statement that we always exceed our neighbour’s expectations, we know that if we want to be accepted for what we are, then we have to accept our neighbour for what they are. This is why ethics is an imperative.

If we are obdurate with our neighbour, and will only accept them if they keep to our standards, then we permit them to do the same to us. We are no longer neighbours, and we no longer live in society. There is no “us”. We are at war.

As I came to the idea of variability by way of my work on sexuality, it suggested itself to me that sexuality is the basis of this ethics: sexuality, that desiring aspect of each one of us. Each one of us knows what we desire, no matter how much we try to cloak those very personal desires with other people’s moral expectations. In our final self analysis we know when we are lying to ourselves about what we desire – it is the closest thing to ourselves in our closest dealings with another person. Thus we should listen to and learn from our bodies, without fear, since our interactions with other people are guided by an ethical imperative.

⁵ A more detailed account of Variability may be found in the introduction to my *Idea of Disability in the Eighteenth Century*, (Lewisburg PA: Bucknell University Press, 2013), pp.14-18.

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It might seem difficult to reverse the common expectation to argue that sexuality should guide our moral actions. But think of the tenderness with which we treat our loved ones. Is this not the very best model for ethical interactions with all other people? When we love we do not curtail our beloved, we want them to have everything they want: this is what we mean when we say we want the best for them.

And following this ethical approach to the variable body, we cannot go wrong. Or can we? Would not trusting in our sexuality lead us to become libertines? The fear of untrammelled sexuality is our contemporary society's latest bugbear, filled as it is with easy-access pornography and stalked by pederasts. But this is not the first time this has been common. Untrammelled sexuality characterised England when the *Book of Common Prayer* was imposed onto its church. Nor is what I am arguing new about trusting sexuality to be a guide to ethics.

This essay will explore the libertine court of Charles II through its literary representations by the notoriously sexual Aphra Behn. It will argue that she is an ethical writer. It will then explore why Jonathan Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, attacked the *Society for the Reformation of Manners*, which was set up to impose a uniform moral standard upon England. His reason: for their misunderstanding of the unaccountable upsurge of desire. In sum, I shall demonstrate that sexuality has been our real guide to ethics for as long as the *Book of Common Prayer* has been imposed on us as our supposed moral touchstone, and suggest that we should continue to trust it.

Libertine law - Aphra Behn

The idea that the court of Charles II was characterised by sexual promiscuity is probably not so far from the truth. After 12 years of exile, he returned from Holland in 1660, and, after publicly humiliating the corpses of his oppressors, granted theatres licences to perform once again and for women to act on stage for the first time. If these can be regarded as signs of the Restoration reaction against the "spiritual authoritarianism" of the Puritan era, then all well and good. More properly, we should look to the Act of Uniformity of 1662, which imposed the Book of Common Prayer onto England and excluded from public office those who did not adhere to the rites of the Anglican Church. Whether or not this suggests that I am arguing that the BCP was responsible for the sexual

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promiscuity of Charles's court, the derivation of the word "Libertine" does set itself in opposition to Puritan ideas, and the word does imply a relaxation of church discipline. The word was first used in Geneva at the time of Calvin, where the leader of the Libertine faction was Ami Perrin, who argued against Calvin's "insistence that church discipline should be enforced uniformly against all members of Genevan society."⁶ For more than a hundred years before Charles II, then, libertinism had been regarded as a reaction against Puritan authoritarian religious discipline, and Vivian de Sola Pinto associated libertinism with Hobbesian materialism:

Those who condemn the pleasures of sense are the priests and teachers who have a vested interest in illusions inherited from the ages of monkery and superstition, the "kingdom of darkness" as Hobbes calls them.⁷

While this is a persuasive argument in its atheist turn, for reasons I do not have space to go into here,⁸ I would rather associate the libertinism of Charles II's court with an increased interest in Epicureanism, and in particular Lucretius. Epicurean philosophy is best known for its naming fear of the wrath of the deities as the cause of human misery, and, following the belief that the universe was not the work of the gods but rather the result of atoms combining and following the laws of reason. Epicureanism recommends rising above unhappiness and degradation to a happy, tranquil life characterised by freedom from fear and pain through rational detachment from earthly things. Charles Segal suggests that Lucretius' world, as a development of Epicurus, is "a place of marvels" and the poet's "wonder even borders on a sense of the sacred,"⁹ which suggests that Lucretius was secretly not Epicurean at all. Amy Olberding, noting Segal's query as to how Lucretius expects one to be rational and detached from a world that is so full of beauty, argues that "to feast upon nature with the gratitude and wonder of one who finds her bounty an abundant source of joy," is to make sweet the bitterness of life.¹⁰ Furthermore, Lucretius assures his readers that all admonitions to use

⁶ Jonathan Zophy, *A Short History of renaissance and Reformation Europe* 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003).

⁷ Vivian de Sola Pinto, *Enthusiast in Wit: A Portrait of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, 1647-1680* (London, 1962), pp.26-29.

⁸ The social contract for mutual benefit and the idea of an objective science of morality which Hobbes advocated were far removed from the libertine's search after pleasure.

⁹ Charles Segal, *Lucretius on Death and Anxiety* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p.7.

¹⁰ Amy Olberding "The Feel of Not to Feel It": Lucretius' Remedy for Death Anxiety, in *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 29, Number 1, April 2005, pp. 114-129.

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their body for the purpose that religion, government and society claim it was designed for, that is, hard work, are false:

But now avoid their gross mistakes, that teach
 The Limbs were made for work, a use for each;
 The Eyes designed to see the Tongue to talk.
 The Legs made strong, and knit to Feet, to walk;
 The Arms framed long, and firm, the servile Hands
 To work, as Health requires, as Life commands:
 And so of all the rest, what e'er they feign,
 Want e'er they teach, tis Non-sense all and vain.
 For proper Uses were design'd for none,
 But all the members framed, each made his Own. ...
 Thus these, and thus our Limbs and Senses too
 Were form'd, before that Mind did know
 What Office, 'twas that they were fit to do.¹¹

Following Lucretius, then, the libertines of Charles's court "made life sweet" by framing their members however they wanted, rather than by following divinely, politically or socially inspired moral guidelines that they thought "Non-sense all and vain". They did so largely by overindulgence in sensual pleasures. They welcomed Thomas Creech's translation of Lucretius' major work, *De rerum natura* (1682) from which the quote above comes, fuelling sales to help the book reach five editions before the end of the century.

Aphra Behn, the first professional British woman writer, has come to prominence in the last forty years. In her entry on Behn in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Janet Todd associates Behn's rise to fame with John Wilmot, Second Earl of Rochester, the man who might be thought of as the libertine's libertine.¹² And to be sure, not only did she write an encomium to his life, but her poem 'The Disappointment' appeared in Rochester's *Poems upon Several Occasions* in 1680 before

¹¹ Thomas Creech, *Titus Lucretius Carus His Six Books*, (London: J. Sawbridge, 1683), pp.126-27. I am quoting from the second edition as it is in this version that Aphra Behn's commendatory poem can be found.

¹² Janet Todd, 'Behn, Aphra (1640?-1689)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [[http://www.oxforddnb.com.winchester.idm.oclc.org/view/article/1961](http://www.oxforddnb.com/winchester.idm.oclc.org/view/article/1961), accessed 23 March 2017].

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it appeared in her own in 1684. But where Rochester was so devoted to libertinism that he died of it, or at least of venereal disease and without his nose at the age of 33, Behn lived until she was 49, which is above the average life expectancy for a middle-class woman living in the seventeenth century, and there is no suggestion that she died of a sexually transmitted disease.¹³

Nevertheless, Behn was a devotee of libertinism, and wrote about positive female sexual experience in 18 plays, 6 novels and many poems. In *The Island of Love*, a poem published as an adjunct to her *Poems upon Several Occasions*, Behn makes clear her belief in the pervading nature of Lucretian epicureanism in her attitude to love as the blind god Cupid controlling all of humankind:

This is the Coast of Africa
Where all things sweetly move;
This is the calm Atlantic Sea
And that the Isle of Love;

To which all Mortals tribute pay,
Old, Young, the Rich and Poor;
Kings do their awful Laws obey,
And Shepherds do adore.

There's none its forces can resist,
Or its Decree Evince,
It Conquers where and when it list,
The Cottager and Prince.

In entering here, the King resigns,
The Robe and Crown he wore;
The Slave new Fetters gladly joyns
To those he dragg'd before.¹⁴

¹³ The life expectancy of a middle-class woman in the seventeenth century is about 40.

¹⁴ Aphra Behn, *Poems upon Several Occasions, with a Voyage to the Island of Love* (London: J. Tonson and I. Tonson, 1684), p.9.

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Love here seems not at all the wonderful thing you might expect from a libertine poem, but is capricious and enslaves even slaves. But for Behn, the Lucretian epicurean, there is a rational solution to the vagaries of Cupid. One might perhaps note the use of all male nouns and pronouns in this poem, and Behn makes us aware that if anyone, it is women who are better able to manipulate reason and realise their happy, Lucretian life.

In her most famous play *The Rover*, we see Hellena berate her brother Pedro about his choice for their sister Florinda, of a rich, old husband. Playacting with Florinda, Hellena mocks the ageing lover Don Vincentio:

And this is the Man you must kiss, nay you must kiss none but him too - and nuzel through his Beard to find his Lips. And this you must submit to for Threescore years, and all for a Joynture!¹⁵

As this shows, Behn is a true libertine and not afraid to discuss the possible pleasures and pitfalls of physical sex. The “threescore years” reminds her audience that life is short, and when sexual fulfilment is set against the horror of Vincentio’s lack of physical attractiveness, the play’s advice to women is to maximise their pleasure. The rational calculation suggests they forget the duty owed to family and follow their own desires. In this way, we can read *The Rover* as a more physically focussed version of the love or duty plot, and one true to the libertine tradition where the outright winner should be - and is - physical love. But there is more to it than this. Hellena spends much of the play reminding her paramour Willmore (who lives up to his name sexually) that she knows he wants to be promiscuous, and that if he continues to act upon his insatiable libertine desires then she will act on hers. After she accuses him of having had sex with the courtesan Angellica, Willmore offers his hand in marriage as security for his faithfulness, which she refuses with the argument:

Hellena. O’ my Conscience, that will be our Destiny, because we are both of one humour; I am as inconstant as you, for I have considered, Captain, that a handsom Woman has a great deal to do whilst her Face is good, for then is our Harvest-time to

¹⁵ Aphra Behn, *The Rover, or the Banish’d Cavaliers*, (London: John Amery, 1677), p.

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gather Friends; and should I in these days of my Youth, catch a fit of foolish Constancy, I were undone; 'tis loitering by day-light in our great Journey: therefore declare, I'll allow but one year for Love, one year for Indifference, and one year for Hate — and then — go hang your self — for I profess myself the gay, the kind, and the inconstant — the Devil's in't if this won't please you.¹⁶

This is a rational argument, against which Willmore's untrustworthy claim to faithfulness has no answer. But where, you may ask, is the morality in Behn's libertine world?

Aphra Behn has been read by feminists as being against patriarchy, and by more recent critics as upholding the libertine politics of Charles II's court. But there is more to her association with libertinism than Rochester, being a woman, or politics. Behn wrote a commendatory poem to the second edition of Thomas Creech's translation of Lucretius *De rerum natura*. Janet Todd suggests that "Creech was eager to neutralize his dangerously unchristian subject matter but Behn saw the poem as a triumphant assertion of rationalism and materialism, a victory of reason over faith."¹⁷ Todd explains her view by suggesting that the version of Behn's poem in the edition of Creech's *De rerum natura* (1683) was a toned down version of that in her own *Poems upon Several Occasions*. In fact only three lines are different, the last three lines of the following quotation:

And Reason over all unfetter'd Plays,
Wanton and undisturbed as Summers Breeze:
That gliding Murmurs o'er the Trees,
And no hard Notion meets, or stops it way;
It Pierces, Conquers, and Compells
As strong as Faith's resistless Oracles,
Faith Religious Souls content,
Faith the secure Retreat of Routed Argument.¹⁸

¹⁶ Behn, *The Rover*, p.34.

¹⁷ Janet Todd, 'Behn, Aphra (1640?–1689)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/winchester.idm.oclc.org/view/article/1961, accessed 23 March 2017].

¹⁸ Aphra Behn, 'To the Unknown Daphnis on his Excellent Translation of Lucretius,' in Creech, *Titus Lucretius Carus His Six Books*, (London: Sawbridge, 1683), p. C2.

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The last three lines in Behn's own *Poems upon Several Occasions* tell us that Reason "Pierces, Conquers and Compells":

Beyond poor Feeble Faith's dull Oracles.
 Faith the despairing Souls content,
 Faith the Last Shift of Routed Argument.¹⁹

We must therefore agree with Todd in her assertion that Behn changes her view of "Reason" between the versions of the poem, from the equal of faith, "As strong as Faith," to something stronger than faith, "Beyond poor Feeble Faith." However, it is the changes in the last line that catch my interest here. Faith changes from being "the secure Retreat" into "the last Shift" of "Routed Argument." Faith for Behn is no final answer to reasonable argument, no "secure Retreat," instead, it is the "last Shift," the "seventh veil" barely hiding the naked fact that Faith can give no proof of its correctness, whereas Reason can and does. And who would trust the rake Willmore's declaration of faithfulness to Hellena?

It is in Behn's recognition of the limits of faith in terms of reason that I find her recognition of variability, and I shall explore it in terms of the poem she shared with Rochester, 'The Disappointment'. This poem, which tells of an interrupted sexual encounter between Lisander and Cloris, is an almost direct translation of a Pierre de Corneille poem "L'occasion perdue - Recouverte" (1658). However, Behn translates only the first 12 verses culminating in Lisander's failure to consummate, and where Corneille continues for a further twenty-eight verses in which Lisander tells Cloris he loves her and the encounter returns to sexual intercourse, Behn finishes in a quick two verse account of Cloris running away from the scene like "Daphne from the Delphick God."

Abigail Williams suggests that 'The Disappointment' is a clever manipulation of a libertine genre, the premature ejaculation poem, of which Rochester's Imperfect Enjoyment is the best known. Williams argues that in 'The Disappointment', "Behn takes a genre devoted to the retelling of an event that traditionally marginalises the woman's experience, and replays it through the mouth of a

¹⁹ Behn, *Poems Upon Several Occasions*, p.53.

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woman.”²⁰ But there is a big difference between ‘The Imperfect Enjoyment’ and ‘The Disappointment’ which passes Williams by. Rochester’s poem is a premature ejaculation poem, but Behn’s is a poem about the failure of Lisander to get an erection.

Natures support, without whose Aid
 She can no humane Being give,
 It self now wants the Art to live,
 Faintness it slacken'd Nerves invade :
 In vain th' enraged Youth assaid
 To call his fleeting Vigour back,
 No Motion 'twill from Motion take,
 Excess of Love his Love betray'd ;
 In vain he Toils, in vain Commands,
 Th' Insensible fell weeping in his Hands.²¹

Making her point clear, Behn transforms Cloris’s discovery of this failure into the reason why she her runs away disappointed.

Cloris returning from the Trance
 Which Love and soft Desire had bred,
 Her tim'rous Hand she gently laid,
 Or guided by Design or Chance,
 Upon that Fabulous Priapus,
 That Potent God (as Poets feign.)
 But never did young Shepherdess
 (Gath'ring of Fern upon the Plain)
 More nimbly draw her Fingers back,
 Finding beneath the Verdant Leaves a Snake.²²

²⁰ <http://writersinspire.org/content/aphra-behn-poetic-culture> [Accessed 19 September 2014].

²¹ Behn, *Poems Upon Several Occasions*, p.74.

²² Behn, *Poems Upon Several Occasions*, p.75.

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Cloris was ready for sex, but Priapus, the erection, has failed to make its appearance whence Cloris, confronted with a slithering snake takes the appropriate action and runs away. In confronting the sexuality of the poem so directly, what can we learn? While this poem might easily be thought trivial, I do not believe it is. Instead I think the poem is truly libertine, and wholly ethical. Behn's Cloris is not appalled by Lisander's sexual overexcitement, but she is brought up short by the thought of why he has failed to get an erection. Has he been having sex with someone else before meeting her? Is that why he is impotent? Having a lot of sexual encounters is what libertines did, after all.

I would suggest that 'The Disappointment' is not a woman's take on a premature ejaculation poem, but another exploration by Behn, like that of *The Rover*, of how women are able to use reason to come to a decision, even at moments of sexual arousal. Behn herself wrote of Creech's translation that it

...dost advance
Our Knowledge from the state of Ignorance;
And Equallst us to Man!²³

Of course, Behn is also noting the fact that women were not given an education in the classics, so she does not know enough Latin to read Lucretius in the original, but she is also drawing attention to the fact that knowledge of rationality is what Lucretius is really discussing, that she has read it and learned from it how to make rational judgments. Cloris running away is, I believe, her realisation that although she is as sexually excited as Lisander, she does not want to have sex with him so soon after he has had sex with someone else. In terms of Behn's connection with the venereal disease ridden Rochester, (and Hellena's attitude towards Willmore) she does not have faith in Lisander's sexual health, so follows her reason and leaves him: a lucky escape.

And this is an ethical decision. Ethical because the decision is made based on evidence and the application of rationality, and it is made between two people in the throes of sexual congress, the result of which is the reduction of Cloris's pain. In Lucretian terms, it is also a triumph of reason

²³ Aphra Behn, 'To the Unknown Daphnis on his Excellent Translation of Lucretius,' in Creech, *Titus Lucretius Carus His Six Books*, (London: Sawbridge, 1683), p. C2.

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over faith, so no wonder Thomas Creech was worried about his translation's effect on his status after the imposition of the BCP: his Fellowship at All Souls' College was challenged because of its atheistical nature.

Furthermore, in the three differing approaches towards the Lucretian epicureanism of Rochester, Behn, and Creech, we find variability. Between the two men in her poetry, Rochester and Creech, Behn decides in her poem to Creech's translation that it is he (named Daphnis) with whom she would rather be close in conversation and verse, than Rochester (named Strephon) the "Ravisher:"

No sooner was famed Strephon's Glory set,
 Strephon the soft, the Lovely, Gay and Great;
 But Daphnis rises like a Morning Star
 That guides the wandering Traveller from afar
 Daphnis, whom every Grace, and Muse inspires
 Scarce Strephon's Ravishing Poetick Fires
 So kindly warm, or so Divinely Cheer.

...

Mayest thou [Daphnis] thy muse and mistress there Caress,
 And may one heighten t'others happiness;
 And whilst thou thus Divinely dost converse
 We are content to know, and to admire thee in thy Sacred Verse.²⁴

Rochester's libertinism is all physical, with all its dangers, Creech's libertinism is all chaste conversation, and Behn's libertinism is somewhere in the middle - physically self-protecting but sexually active.

What we have seen in this brief account of Behn's libertine verse is that the ethics of the libertine way of life (which culminate in the avoidance of sexually transmitted disease) can derive from sexuality rather than the moralists or the laws. Furthermore, in Behn's recognition of the limits of faith in terms of Lucretian reason, I find her recognition of variability: Rochester's, Creech's and her ethical systems are all based upon Lucretius and all are "the same only different."

²⁴ Behn, *Poems Upon Several Occasions*, p.57.

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Anglican faith - Jonathan Swift

But that was not the end of the battle between reason and faith. The ravages of libertinism understood in Rochester's version were devastating to social cohesion and even for the future of the human species. Newspapers printed the "Bills of Mortality" each month: the numbers of children christened, and the numbers of people buried, and it made stark reading. The population of Britain was decreasing. Why no-one took any notice of Aphra Behn's version of libertinism I do not know, if they had, it would have brought forward our understanding of ethics and morality greatly, and it would also have brought forward the cause of women's rights.

Instead, and perhaps not surprisingly, the backlash against libertinism attacked only Rochester's version of it and in 1691 the *Society for the Reformation of Manners* was set up with the espoused aims of suppressing profanity and immorality. The SRM gained both Church and Crown patronage, and was encouraged by the Archbishops of Canterbury, John Tillotson and Thomas Tenison, while Queens Mary and Anne issued Proclamations against Vice at its behest.

But not everyone supported it. While the ideals of the SRM might have appeared laudable, the results of their activities were the censorship of the theatres, breaking up brothels and tormenting prostitutes. Attacking writers and prostitutes, I would suggest, is never a good idea. This is not to say that all writers are men who visit prostitutes, but rather that if one attacks both prostitutes and writers for the same reason – profanity – the writers will find themselves on the side of the oppressed and will write in support of prostitutes.

Jonathan Swift, ordained Anglican Minister and later Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, was the most famous writer of the period who wrote in support of prostitutes and against the Church- and Crown-financed *Society for the Reformation of Manners*. Swift's first attempt at criticising the activities of the SRM was a brilliant and subtle satire, *A Project for the Advancement of Religion, and the Reformation of Manners*.²⁵ So subtle is the satire, however, that even *wikipedia* today cites

²⁵ Jonathan Swift, *A Project for the Advancement of Religion, and the Reformation of Manners*, (London: H.Hills, 1709).

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the pamphlet as supportive of the SRM's goals. But right from its Dedication to the Countess of Berkeley it is pure satire. The pamphlet was published in 1709, the year after the death of Elizabeth, first Countess of Berkeley, and while another Elizabeth was second Countess of Berkeley, and the dedication to whichever one, mentions "that beautiful Race (images of their Parents) which calls you Mother." If the dedication is to the late Countess, then she was mother to Lady Henrietta Berkeley, who while still under age, had an affair with her sister's husband Ford Grey, Lord Grey of Warke, which became a national scandal and the topic of one of Aphra Behn's novels, *Love Letters between a Nobleman and his sister* (1684). If the dedication was to the present Countess, then she was the mother of Lady Betty Germaine, who disgraced her family by marrying in 1706, on three weeks' acquaintance, a man who was below her in rank, a recent widower, thirty years her senior and an illegitimate son of William II, Prince of Orange. Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, called him an Innkeeper's son,

If the dedication is not enough to warn readers about the satire, Swift begins the pamphlet proper with the comment:

Of all the Schemes offer'd to the Publick in this projecting Age, I have observed with some Displeasure, that there have never been any for the Improvement of Religion and Morals:²⁶

Since the SRM had been set up in 1691, and the pamphlet published in 1709, Swift does not seem to think much of what it had achieved in the past 18 years. A much less subtle attack on the SRM followed in 1734 (though it was almost certainly written much earlier) Swift's poem 'A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed'. This time the subject matter is so unsubtle that it has been impossible for men to write about since the feminist denunciations of it in the 1970s.

Susan Gubar, half of the *Madwoman in the Attic* team, has written of Swift

At no time were ... female grotesques more prevalent than during the eighteenth century. Emblems of filthy materiality, committed only to their private ends, the

²⁶ Swift, *A Project for the Advancement of Religion, and the Reformation of Manners*, p.A2.

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decaying prostitutes portrayed by Jonathan Swift in his excremental poetry are quite literally monsters whose arts are both debased and debasing.²⁷

Since this statement hardly anyone has been brave enough to read the poem seriously for its contribution to knowledge, and when critics have tried, they have turned meekly to psychoanalysing Swift, and suggesting that he had a problem with women's bodies. Brean Hammond, for instance, argues in his paper 'Corinna's Dream':

I intend to use this most controversial of Swift's poems to suggest that it calls for a broadly materialist and a broadly psychoanalytical response; and in trying to explain why I think this is so, I will be hinting that continuities exist between two of the great master-narratives of our time, those of Marx and Freud, so frequently presented as mutually exclusive.²⁸

I am not sure whether Freud and Marx had read Swift. I am sure that Swift had not read Marx and Freud. But I am sure Swift had read Aphra Behn, and for this reason I shall agree with Susan Gubar that

In the representation of male dread of women and, more specifically, of male anxiety over female control and artistry, Swift's contaminating bitch goddesses evoke a long line of female monsters of biblical and classical origin,²⁹

They do, and the "bitch goddess" whom Swift attacks in his poem is the Lucretian epicurean, Aphra Behn. He, an ordained minister of the Church of England, cannot let her get away with atheism and the triumph of rationality over faith. So when we turn to the poem, let us all put away the idea that Swift hated women. He loved two women dearly during his life, Vanessa and Stella. That he married neither of them was probably because he was illegitimate and had no income with which to support a wife. And he loved the whore Corinna too.

²⁷Susan Gubar, 'The Female Monster in Augustan Satire,' in *Signs*, Volume 3 no.2 (Winter, 1977) pp.380-394, p.380.

²⁸Brean S. Hammond, 'Corinna's Dream,' *The Eighteenth Century*, Volume 36 no.2 (1995) pp.99-118.

²⁹Gubar, *Female Monster*, p.380.

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Corinna, Pride of Drury-Lane,
 For whom no Shepherd sighs in vain;
 Never did Covent Garden boast
 So bright a batter'd, strolling Toast;
 No drunken Rake to pick her up,
 No Cellar where on Tick to sup;
 Returning at the Midnight Hour;
 Four Stories climbing to her Bow'r;
 Then, seated on a three-legg'd Chair,
 Takes off her artificial Hair:
 Now, picking out a Crystal Eye,
 She wipes it clean, and lays it by.
 Her Eye-Brows from a Mouse's Hyde,
 Stuck on with Art on either Side,
 Pulls off with Care, and first displays 'em,
 Then in a Play-Book smoothly lays 'em.³⁰

As Corinna continues her toilette, she removes her teeth, her breasts and her buttocks. She cleans off her white and red makeup and applies plasters to her syphilis sores. She takes a mercury pill hopefully to kill off other venereal diseases and goes to sleep. What I would like to suggest is that Swift shines his light on Corinna to enter into dialogue with Hellena in Behn's *Rover*, and where Hellena tells us "that a handsom Woman has a great deal to do whilst her Face is good," Swift reminds us that women amount to more than the sexual attraction of their bodies.

Corinna deconstructs herself of what makes her marketable, and what remains? A woman, who dreams. And if there is something terrible in her poem, it is that her dreams are no different from her daily life:

With Pains of Love tormented lies;
 Or if she chance to close her Eyes,
 Of Bridewell and the Compter dreams,

³⁰ Jonathan Swift, *A Beautiful Young Nymph going to Bed*. (London: J. Roberts, 1734), pp.3-4.

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And feels the Lash, and faintly screams;
 Or, by a faithless Bully drawn,
 At some Hedge-Tavern lies in Pawn;
 Or to Jamaica seems transported,
 Alone, and by no Planter courted;
 Or, near Fleet-Ditch's oozy Brinks,
 Surrounded with a Hundred Stinks,
 Belated, seems on watch to lye,
 And snap some Cully passing by;³¹

She, it would seem, is just the person whom the SRM should help. But they don't, and they appear in her dream:

... struck with Fear, her Fancy runs
 On Watchmen, Constables and Duns,
 From whom she meets with frequent Rubs;
 But, never from Religious Clubs;
 Whose Favour she is sure to find,
 Because she pays 'em all in Kind.³²

While Swift's suggestion remains indelible that the SRM, the "religious Clubs" are hypocrites since prostitutes buy them off with free sex, there is a much more important point being made in this poem: that sexual attraction demonstrates the failure of reason, and therefore, and more importantly, that Behn's Lucretian epicurean ethics puts too much faith in reason. Furthermore, Corinna is atomised in her undressing as a satire on Lucretius' atomistic beliefs, because in Swift's time atomism was a belief, an article of faith. Just because the atomic theory of matter has now been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt, in Swift's time it was just an idea, in which Behn chose to have faith.

³¹ Swift, *Beautiful Young Nymph*, p.5.

³² Swift, *Beautiful Young Nymph*, p.6.

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Thus, when we read of Corinna we read of a woman who is not in as good a bargaining position as Hellena, and who cannot even dream of the rational detachment of a happy life free from fear or pain. Corinna cannot bargain with the random Willmores who pay her for sex, for them to be faithful to her if they want her to be faithful to them: for Corinna, sex is a life and death financial arrangement. She sells sex in order to buy food, and on the night of the poem she has found no punters and nowhere that she can get her dinner on credit.

But in attacking the SRM in the same poem, Swift is suggesting that a stern moral code is not the way to help Corinna. Cupid's darts fly off everywhere, hit everyone and cause chaos, as is demonstrated by the fact that Corinna can use sex to buy off their threats of prosecution. However, as with Behn, we are left with the question about whether and how the poem is an ethical response to Corinna. First, it is important to respond to Susan Gubar's critique with some questions. Would she rather Swift had never written about the destitution of a sad old prostitute? Would she rather have had Swift make her into some sort of Hellena, always with a bright witty riposte to her Bully, her Cully, her Watchmen, Constables and Duns? Would she rather not know that Corinna had to buy off the members of the SRM with free sex? From my own point of view, I would rather know, and I would rather know how much Corinna meant to Swift.

Corinna's name is an old one, as she was the beloved of Ovid, and the addressee of his *Amores*, written in 16 BC. Nor was she new for Swift, who wrote about her in an earlier poem, *Cadenus and Vanessa* (1726), in which she was also portrayed as a prostitute, although this time with a higher class Cully.

Corinna, with that youthful Air,
Is Thirty, and a bit to spare;
Her Fondness for a certain Earl
Began when I was but a Girl;³³

The poem, which is subtitled "A Law Case", tells of an imaginary court case between the Nymphs and the Shepherds, heard by Venus as the judge, in which the nymphs accuse men of being attracted to women less for love and more for their wealth:

³³ Jonathan Swift, *Cadenus and Vanessa* (London: J. Roberts, 1726), p.26.

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The counsel for the fair began
 Accusing the false creature, man.
 The brief with weighty crimes was charged,
 On which the pleader much enlarged:
 That Cupid now has lost his art,
 Or blunts the point of every dart;
 His altar now no longer smokes;
 His mother's aid no youth invokes—
 This tempts free-thinkers to refine,
 And bring in doubt their powers divine,
 Now love is dwindled to intrigue,
 And marriage grown a money-league.³⁴

The “law case” is, of course, really between Swift the Anglican minister, and Behn, the Lucretian “free-thinker.” And in his reworking of the same ideas, Behn’s rational response to sex portrayed by her heroines Hellena and Cloris is turned back on itself. Swift’s women’s accusation that men blunt Cupid’s darts and reduce sex to a financial transaction reminds us of Behn’s failed erection poem, *The Disappointment*. Likewise, the shepherds accuse the nymphs that they are only interested in sex: presumably, if Cloris had loved Lisander she’d have stayed with him, but because he broke the sexual bargain she ran away.

That modern love is no such thing
 As what those ancient poets sing;
 A fire celestial, chaste, refined,
 Conceived and kindled in the mind,
 Which having found an equal flame,
 Unites, and both become the same,
 In different breasts together burn,
 Together both to ashes turn.
 But women now feel no such fire,

³⁴ Swift, *Cadenus and Vanessa*, pp.5-6.

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And only know the gross desire;
 Their passions move in lower spheres,
 Where'er caprice or folly steers.³⁵

The situation based on the rational calculations of libertine ethics is intolerable to Venus, who wants men and women to love one another, whereas rationality makes all men Cullies and all women whores, so she

... threw her law-books on the shelf,³⁶

enlists the help of the goddess of wisdom and between the two of them they create Vanessa to win back the Shepherds to love. Vanessa is young and beautiful with £5000, and with Athena's help, is also clever. What Venus doesn't know, is that Athena only gives Vanessa wisdom to make her invulnerable to men's approaches. The result of turning their creation loose on the world is hardly what they expected, Vanessa is hated by women and frightens off all the Shepherds.

The reason for this failure is because what both goddesses are doing is rational calculation, they are still using the libertine ethics that started the problems with love that were being heard in the original court case. As Swift tells us, Venus:

... studied well the point, and found
 Her foe's conclusions were not sound,
 From premises erroneous brought,
 And therefore the deduction's nought,³⁷

And this is where the poem takes a brilliant turn. Swift reminds us that love is not a calculation and cannot be warded off with calculations written in books, however wise or moral. Cupid's arrows will always defeat rational argument and moral codes

³⁵ Swift, *Cadenus and Vanessa*, p.6.

³⁶ Swift, *Cadenus and Vanessa*, p.10.

³⁷ Swift, *Cadenus and Vanessa*, p.15.

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But Cupid, full of mischief, longs
 To vindicate his mother's wrongs.
 On Pallas all attempts are vain;
 One way he knows to give her pain;
 Vows on Vanessa's heart to take
 Due vengeance, for her patron's sake.

...

The boy made use of all his craft,
 In vain discharging many a shaft,
 Pointed at colonels, lords, and beaux;
 Cadenus warded off the blows,
 For placing still some book betwixt,
 The darts were in the cover fixed,
 Or often blunted and recoiled,
 On Plutarch's morals struck, were spoiled.³⁸

Plutarch's *Morals* run to five volumes of miscellaneous essays, and is the first recorded source of the chicken and egg problem, suggesting that it is not possible to decide in a court case who is at fault in the problems of modern love. But Swift goes on to make a much more important point. He first reminds us that love does not happen between eternally youthful imaginary nymphs and shepherds. It happens to real people,

Cadenus many things had writ,
 Vanessa much esteemed his wit,
 And called for his poetic works!
 Meantime the boy in secret lurks.
 And while the book was in her hand,
 The urchin from his private stand
 Took aim, and shot with all his strength
 A dart of such prodigious length,

³⁸ Swift, *Cadenus and Vanessa*, p.22.

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It pierced the feeble volume through,
And deep transfixed her bosom too.³⁹

In the poem, Swift himself is Cadenus who “many things had writ” and Vanessa his pet name for Esther Vanhomrigh, his tutee, and the object of his ageing affections when he was 44 and she less than 20. The rest of the poem explores how their love affair might go, should he teach Vanessa how to be a proper wife, or should she teach him how to be a proper beau? But the poem does not reach a conclusion, an arrangement that can be reduced to a series of statements of fact:

But what success Vanessa met
Is to the world a secret yet;
Whether the nymph, to please her swain,
Talks in a high romantic strain;
Or whether he at last descends
To like with less seraphic ends;
Or to compound the bus'ness, whether
They temper love and books together;
Must never to mankind be told,
Nor shall the conscious muse unfold.⁴⁰

And nor can the world know. What is going on between Cadenus and Vanessa is their joint decision to have faith in each other in each moment they are together. They have not made a calculation of what they both should be or become while they are in love. They will each remain being themselves, as the poem says:

For Nature must be Nature still.⁴¹

³⁹ Swift, *Cadenus and Vanessa*, pp.23-24.

⁴⁰ Swift, *Cadenus and Vanessa*, p.35.

⁴¹ Swift, *Cadenus and Vanessa*, p.26.

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Thus, for Swift, the ethics based on his account of sexual attraction are irrational - "faithful" in the proper sense of the word. Full of faith. They are not reducible to the Lucretian epicurean happy state:

Love, why do we one passion call?
 When 'tis a compound of them all;
 Where hot and cold, where sharp and sweet,
 In all their equipages meet;
 Where pleasures mixed with pains appear,
 Sorrow with joy, and hope with fear.⁴²

Neither can Swift's ethics of love be reduced to a financial arrangement. How different is a wife from the whore Corinna, if she sees only the fiscal benefits of marriage and has no faith in her husband?

And this ethics is found in the mutual feeling of love, which is "having faith in your body and the body of your partner." And in this faith we find variability: the knowledge that my loved one is "the same only different (from me)". If we learn this from our most intimate dealings, which happen at the most unexpected moments, then we can extrapolate from that knowledge into all our dealings with other people. We do best when we do not reduce them to us or to our expectations and understanding of ourselves, but let them flower as they are themselves. And we do best when we are following this ethical imperative.

Following this argument, if this gay man has a lesson to teach the bishops, it is that their "fresh tone and culture of welcome and support" for the homosexual members of their congregations, might be based on the idea of variability, which has motivated our society since the foundation of the Anglican Church. It's not a new fashion, just a new way of understanding the way things have always been. And as to gay marriage, this new government edict should not be understood to be an equal of heterosexual marriage, but nor as entirely different. It is the focus of the words "heterosexual marriage" and "gay marriage" which needs to be reconsidered. Heterosexual marriage is not a one size fits all estate. Each heterosexual marriage is entered into for the same only different reasons, balancing a sense of commitment and financial

⁴² Swift, *Cadenus and Vanessa*, p.55.

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security, in ways that are unique to each couple. In the same way, each gay couple who marry do so for their own unique set of reasons in which commitment and financial security are two of the many elements in play.

This is not to argue against the truth of the coming and going of fashion. Gay people have for centuries hidden the gift of their sexuality because of the long-standing fashion for homophobia. Now that execrable fashion has passed into obscurity, it is time for the heterosexual world to learn from those people they have persecuted for so long. I did not want to go to Gay Pride this year, so I was moody when my partner cajoled me into going. I do not like crowds as I become disorientated. But I am so glad I went. My partner described to me a trans person who had caught his eye, who was six feet six tall and wearing six-inch-high heels. Thin as a reed, they had short brown hair like a boy, large hooped earrings and black bell-bottomed trousers. Their top was skin-tight lycra in rainbow colours. “They are so vulnerable!” my partner cried, and I demanded to be introduced. And so this big bear man was introduced to a trans person for the very first time, and we embraced. They were very thin indeed, and so very vulnerable, they could barely whisper a quick “Thank-you for loving me,” into my ear. But how could I not love them? they were out on the streets and I was proud of them. It could only happen at Gay Pride. “You look magnificent!” I told them, “Trust me I am a blind man.”