Speech, silences and bodily manifestations in madame de lafayette’s the princess ...

In her essay, “ Origins of the Novel”, Marthe Robert characterises the novel as knowing “ neither rule nor restraint. Open to every possibility, its boundaries fluctuate in all directions”. Indeed, both Madame de Lafayette’s The Princess de Cleves and Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko are often claimed to be the first novels to engage in the psychological analysis and realist depiction of marginalised groups in society, thereby triumphing over earlier, more prescriptive forms of writing. A crucial way in which these novels dissect human emotions and conduct is through the complex and multilayered forms of communication between characters. While spoken language is often superficial and dictated by social protocol, the various physical manifestations and involuntary bodily “ confessions” described in the novels expose the elaborate ambiguities and passions behind human behaviour. Set in the hierarchical and refined sixteenth-century royal court of Henri II, the characters in The Princess de Cleves engage in polite discourse and customary platitudes, thus exuding a sense of courtly propriety. As such, they often address each other in an elevated and courteous manner: “ I swear to Your Majesty, with all the respect that I owe you, that I have no attachment for any lady of the court” [97]. The princess herself is subject to the codes of courtly discourse, and her manner of speaking is largely characteristic of her reticent temperament. Her effaceable language therefore reflects the importance of outward respectability and the dominance of approved social “ maxims” to which the protagonist is expected to adhere. For example, through the telling of cautionary tales, such as that of the adulterous Mme de Tournon, Madame de Cleves learns that a lady of the court is expected to show respect and subservience to her husband. The emphasis placed on sincerity and good manners therefore

guarantees that true feelings are frequently hidden. Indeed, it is not until the strikingly unconventional “ confession scene” that the characters’ facade of polite diffidence slips away, with husband and wife finally engaging in a remarkably modern outburst of emotions: “ I adore you, I hate you, I offend you, I beg your forgiveness; I am filled with wonder and admiration for you, and with shame at these feelings” [144] Madame de Cleves herself acknowledges the particularity of her discourse – “ a confession to you that no wife has ever made to her husband” – thereby accentuating the scene’s atypical nature and reinforcing the reader’s perception of the royal court as an oppressive and stifling environment. Spoken dialogue thus takes a highly ritualised and insincere form, enabling the characters to hide behind a restrictive mask of courtly decorum and civility. Due to the contrived and formulaic nature of much spoken language, therefore, words are often twisted and distorted in order to exercise control over others. The manipulative power of the spoken word is demonstrated by the Duc de Nemours’s skilful reassurances following a misunderstanding: “ as it is easy to persuade someone of a truth they want to believe, he convinced her that he had no part in the letter” [105]. The ease with which the Duc alters Madame de Cleve’s perceptions exposes the potential of spoken language to act as a tool of deception. Indeed, the significant amount of whispering and rumour-spreading that occurs in the novel suggests that the face that one presents to the court may be very different to their true character. The danger associated with speech is pertinently articulated by Mme de Chartres, who warns that “ If you judge by appearances in this place… you will often be deceived, because what appears to be the case hardly ever is” [46]. In spite of her mother’s advice, however, Madame de Cleves’s inability

to interpret the true intentions behind speech exacerbates her lack of power in a highly ruthless society, a shortcoming which leads to tragic consequences. A similar naivety and guilessness with regard to spoken language can be found in Oroonoko, with the “ Royal Slave” displaying an almost childlike trust in the words of others. The protagonist, “ whose Honour was such as he never had violated a Word in his life himself” [32], places an unquestioning value on the spoken word and is thus continually the victim of deception and misinformation: “ They fed him from Day to Day with Promises, and delay’d him, till the Lord Governor shou’d come; so that he began to suspect them of falsehood” [41]. Furthermore, it could be claimed that his wife is the greater victim of the monopolised nature of spoken language – largely silent throughout the novel, both her gender and her race place her at a social disadvantage. Her status as a “ doubly oppressed” character ensures that Imoinda does not have the privilege of expressing herself through open dialogue. As a result, it is clear that spoken language (or the lack thereof) can be used as a tool of subjugation and dishonesty by those who hold positions of power in society. It is therefore necessary to consider other forms of communication between characters, as true emotions are rarely portrayed through dialogue alone. In the light of this, it can be claimed that silence, rather than the spoken word, offers a more penetrating insight into the human mind. Due to Imoinda’s engagement to the King, the two lovers are initially unable to outwardly express affection for each other and must, therefore, rely on tacit exchanges. Upon their reunion, they communicate simply through the “ Parley of the Eyes”, yet their feelings are made clear through the manner in which they silently gaze at one another: “’twas this powerful Language alone

that in an Instant convey'd all the Thoughts of their Souls to each other" [22] By portraying the two central characters' love in such understated terms, Behn is therefore suggesting that silence can act as a form of language in itself, as mere glances can effectively convey the most intense and powerful of emotions. Similarly, the adulterous courtship depicted in The Princess de Cleves is largely undertaken by the silent act of looking. Indeed, it has been noted that Madame de Cleves and the Duc de Nemours never so much as touch hands throughout the course of the novel, yet their interaction is highly erotically-charged. This quiet passion is most apparent during the Duc's secret visit to Mme de Cleves's country house at Coulommiers, an act of " mutual voyeurism" which sees him furtively observing the princess gazing at his portrait " with the intensity of meditation that only passionate love can induce" [148]. Although no words are uttered during this scene, the two characters' mutual longing is made explicit through their private actions. Furthermore, the frequent moments of silence in the novel enable the reader to gain a valuable insight into the thoughts of certain characters, for example through the interior monologue of M. de Cleves: " For she does indeed love me," he said…"[40]. By gaining access to his innermost thoughts, the reader is privy to something that he would not express in speech, and thus feels a degree of empathy towards his predicament. As Woshinsky highlights, the inhabitants of the court have been conditioned to keep their true feelings to themselves, and " they do not dare cease, because they have no way of dealing with open feeling". Tellingly, it is Madame de Cleves's silence which betrays her adulterous feelings towards another man, thus enabling her husband to correctly decipher her behaviour: " Mme de Cleves said nothing and her silence confirmed what her husband

was thinking. “ You do not answer,” he went on. “ And that means that I am correct.”” [113] The emotional intensity of the discourse in this scene exposes another notable function of silence in the novel. It plays in crucial role in the building of tension and suspense throughout M. de Cleves’s interrogation of his wife, culminating in the desperate, physical act of Mme de Cleves “ throwing herself at his feet”. De Lafayette therefore uses silence as a narrative tool, allowing her to explore the previously neglected theme of fears and desires of women in sixteenth-century France. While it is clear that much spoken language is rife with dishonesty and insincerity, both de Lafayette and Behn suggest that a kind of truth can instead be found on the body. There are several examples of bodily confessions throughout the two narratives, suggesting that it is possible for the human body itself to be “ read”. For example, Madame de Cleves outwardly reveals the subject of her thoughts through the act of “ fondling” the ribbons bearing the colours she associates with the Duc de Nemours, with its sexual connotations reminding us of the intensity of her desire. In addition, many instances can be found of Mme de Cleves being betrayed by her blushes, a physical reaction that she has no control over – “ luckily for her, her face was in shadow” [124]. It is through spontaneous physical responses, therefore, that the body inadvertently confesses the sins of the mind. Likewise, the inhabitants of Surinam in Oroonoko display their feelings of affection through modest glances and blushes (“ A Negro can change Colour; for I have seen ‘ em as frequently blush, and look pale, and that as visibly as ever I saw in the most beautiful White”) [19]. As the characters have very little control over their physical expressions, it can thus be said to be the only means through which truth is fully displayed. Consequently, both The Princess de Cleves and

Oroonoko relate moral decency to bodily display, presenting the body as a symbol of virtue and discipline. While the inhabitants of the court in The Princess de Cleves achieve this through elaborate dress and lavish jewellery, the bodily display in Oroonoko takes a much less refined form, with Behn placing a particular emphasis on mutilation and maiming. As Robert L. Chibka notes, “ Proof on the body becomes increasingly the only kind that counts”, and the death of Oroonoko’s wife summons a grief that cannot be expressed through mere words. Instead, value is placed on fortitude, and contempt of physical pain is regarded as a test of moral calibre. This endurance is most strikingly presented through the symbolic image of Oroonoko calmly smoking throughout his dismemberment, thereby proving his heroic status: “ He had learn’d to take Tobaco; and when he was assur’d he should Dye, he desir’d they would give him a Pipe in his Mouth, ready Lighted, which they did; and the Executioner came, and first cut off his Members, and threw them into the Fire; after that, with an ill-favoured Knife, they cut his Ears, and his Nose, and burn’d them; he still Smoak’d on, as if nothing had touch’d him…” [64] By resisting the temptation of suicide and choosing a noble death, Oroonoko avoids the degrading label of “ slave”, instead becoming a figure of admiration and respect. Similarly, Madame de Cleves does not act upon her desire for the Duc de Nemours and thus retains her sexual and emotional integrity in order to resist self-definition as an adulteress. As a consequence, both Madame de Cleves and Oroonoko demonstrate a remarkable sense of restraint – albeit in very different ways – thus illustrating how bodily manifestations are often indicative of a person’s inner-self. In conclusion, it is clear that spoken discourse alone does not adequately express the intricate emotions and behaviours involved in human

interaction. Rather, Behn and de Lafayette demonstrate how small-scale interactions between individuals, whether through explicit dialogue or subtle physical expressions, can have much wider ramifications. Bodily expressions, such as blushing and lustful glances, convey intensely powerful emotions and thoughts, offering the reader a deeper insight into the psyche of the characters. Therefore, both Oroonoko and The Princess de Cleves are highly innovative novels, with the writers' synthesis of verbal discourse and bodily manifestations providing the reader with an affecting insight into the complexity of human emotions and behaviours.