Charlotte Sleigh, University of Kent
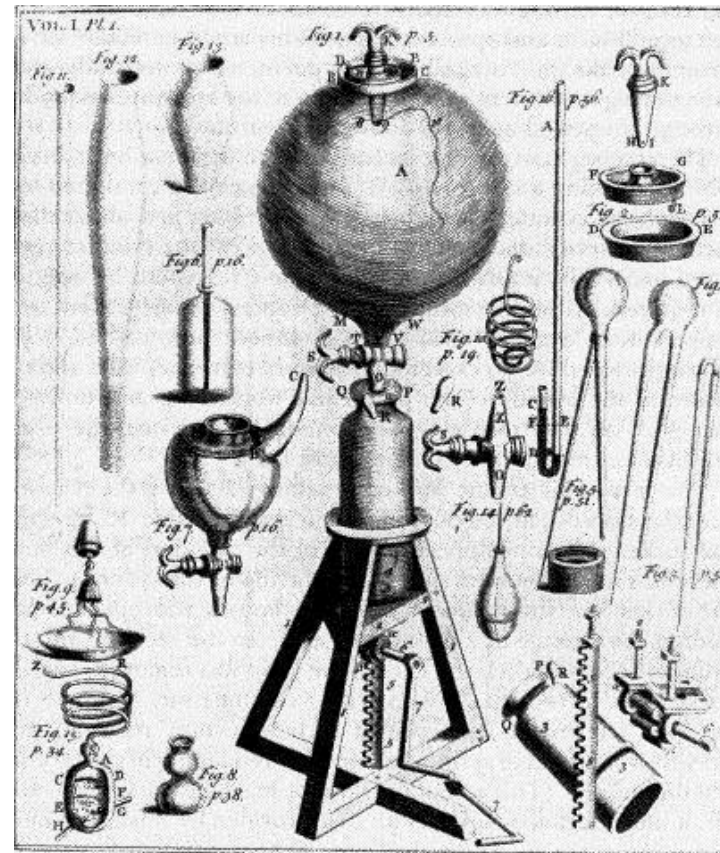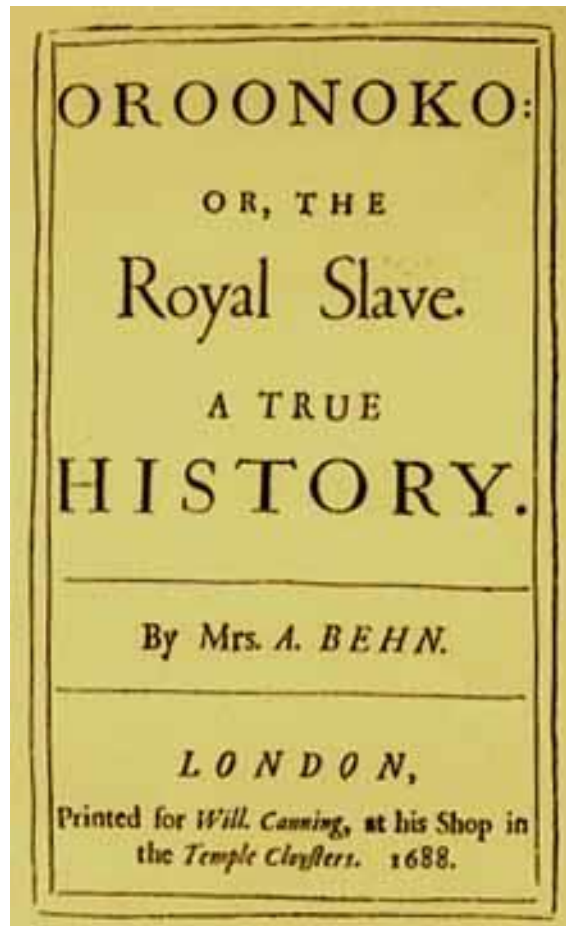
Empiricism and the Novel

Novels and experiments: two C17 technologies for making truth

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Antecedents of the modern novel

- Romances

- Travel writing

- *Belles lettres*

First page of William Caxton's edition of Sir Thomas
Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485)

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Aphra Behn on trustowrthiness

I do not pretend, in giving you the history of this Royal Slave, to entertain my reader with adventures of a feigned hero, whose life and fortunes fancy may manage at the poet's pleasure; nor in relating the truth, design to adorn it with any accidents but such as arrived in earnest to him: and it shall come simply into the world, recommended by its own proper merits and natural intrigues; there being enough of reality to support it, and to render it diverting, without the addition of invention. I was myself an eye-witness to a great part of what you will find here set down; and what I could not be witness of, I received from the mouth of the chief actor in this history, the hero himself.

Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko* (1688)

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The Royal Society and the birth of empiricism

Thomas Sprat,
History of the Royal Society (1667)

Picture from http://commons.wikimedia.org

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Common features of the modern novel and modern science

- Used to work through questions of what counted as truth

- Self-conscious rejection of previous traditions

- Embrace of vernacular language and suspicion of rhetoric

- All about private judgement, guaranteed by personal trustworthiness

- Truth based upon – and negotiated in conjunction with – a sort of gentlemanly code

Empiricism in the C20

Pictures from http://commons.wikimedia.org

Karl Popper (1902-93): science vs. ideology

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Things to take away from this session

1. Knowing what empiricism is (trust in observation, some distrust of words)

2. Understanding that empiricism is not an absolute or self-evident epistemology but a response to historically contingent problems (C17 and C20)

3. Being ready to spot examples of empiricism in literature and to figure out, historically, what it means in that context and why it is there

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