

**“MURDERESS OF TWO HUSBANDS”: FEMALE AGENCY AS FEMALE
LOYALTY IN *THE HISTORY OF THE NUN***

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Abstract: *This work studies the behaviour of the protagonist of The History of the Nun: or, The Fair Vow-Breaker (1689) to investigate both what motivates her decisions (from pious woman to murderer) and what the objectives of her author may be. The conclusion reached is that female agency and the transgressive desire developed by Aphra Behn presented a new conception of femininity. Behn challenges the social contract and subverts seventeenth century conceptions of gender. Through Isabella's behaviour Behn challenges established feminine morality, postulating a new role for women within society. The implication is that the act of breaking a holy vow, and the courage shown by a woman determined to take responsibility for her own life and make her own decisions in society, inevitably ends in tragedy and disaster.*

Keywords: *Aphra Behn, Charles I, Female Agency, Monstrosity, Restoration Literature, Short Fiction.*

“An impudent woman is [...] a kind of Monster, a thing diverted and distorted from its proper form”
(Allestree 1673: 114-115)

1. Introduction

Relations between nuns and gentlemen was a recurrent theme in the English literature of the 1670s. In 1678 Roger L'Estrange translated and published *Five Love Letters from a Nun to a Cavalier*, which told the story of the clandestine affair between the Portuguese Franciscan Nun Marianna Alcoforado and the French officer Noel Bouton de Chamilly. The source text was *Lettres Portugaises traduites en français*, published in France in 1669. The English series

was continued in 1683 with *Five Love-Letters Written by a Cavalier, in answer to the Five Love-Letters Written to him by a Nun*.

Other works displayed an anti-Catholic sentiment, the objective being to “prevent English Catholics from sending their daughters to French convents and revealing the true antics performed in nunneries” (Ezell 2017: 293). This is evident in such works as *The Nunns' Complaint against the Fryars* (1676), *The Adamite, or, The Loves of Father Rock and his intrigues with the nuns a famous novel translated out of French* (published by Dorman Newman in 1683) and *Venus in the Cloister or the nun in her Smock*, (a French text, translated into English in 1683) in which Sister Angelique instructs the young novice Sister Agnès in matters of sexual conduct. Margaret J. M. Ezell (2017: 293) suggests that Aphra Behn¹ wrote “her short fictions during the 1680s” against this aforementioned ‘background’.

A deceptively simple and often overlooked short fiction, Aphra Behn's *The History of the Nun: or, The Fair Vow-Breaker*², moves away from the prevailing current of anti-Catholic sentiment to promote alternative values. Through the remarkable female agency of its protagonist Isabella, the text explores a more feminocentric perspective as opposed to the traditional patriarchal worldview and hierarchical structure. This paper examines the circumstances of Isabella's story, exploring how Behn reflects the tragic consequences of one woman's agency.

This paper will investigate the reasons that motivated the metamorphosis of the main character from pious devotee to murderess, condemned to execution. The story describes a protagonist who initially obeys every word of instruction from her father, before undergoing a profound internal crisis and starting to make her own decisions. She goes on to exercise her free will, fully aware that she is contravening her father's orders and thereby challenging the entire structure of societal norms and religious laws. The paper will go on to investigate the behaviour and reactions of Isabella throughout the story; from the moment she is brought to a convent as a young girl, until her death by execution at the age of twenty-seven. The aim is to explore the strategies and objectives of the gender reversal that the author employs at different stages in the narrative.

To develop this idea and to achieve the proposed objectives, it should be mentioned that the concept of femininity is a social construction as well as a fictional structure and that the behaviour of the protagonist must be viewed within the framework of the “logic of the social

¹ A revised chronology of the life of Aphra Behn, her publications and some key historical events are to be found in O'Donnell (2014: 11-15).

² The short fiction was licensed on 22 October 1689 and published in the same year.

contract” (Armstrong 1987: 30). Literature is a social commentary that reflects the historical, social and political context in which it appears. Gender roles are established through literature. Specifically in this story they are revealed through two starkly contrasting processes, the first being an adherence to the social mores of patriarchal society, the other being the total undermining of the logical foundations of the established social construct. Within this theoretical framework, the concept of female agency becomes a fundamental aspect of our working hypothesis, in terms of how the protagonist enacts the different decisions she makes throughout the narrative.

In addition to the foundational concepts mentioned above, this paper is constructed on more current principles of feminist theory. These include the notion of the “female criminal subject” developed by Kirsten T. Saxton (2009: 1, 32), a concept which echoes the contemporary discourses on crime and murder. Saxton (2009: 31-54) studied the concept in relation to the 18th century novel, beginning with several examples taken from the work of Aphra Behn and Delarivier Manley. The homicidal female represents subversive behaviour, she “embod[ies] tropic notions of female possibility”. She has a social function in contemporary literary and legal narrative, rejecting established gender roles and challenging the patterns of female behaviour accepted and supported by the *status quo*.

Laura Linker (2011: 1) investigates the correlation between “women's agency and literary and social constraints”. She cites the figure of “the female libertine” who has to “struggle to express her desires in an unforgiving world”, linking to this the terms of “sexual and intellectual freedom” (97).

Aleksondra Hultquist (2015: 485) maps the concept of “female sexual desire” as well as addressing the ideas of feminine passion and identity. She establishes that sexual dynamics responds to a metaphor and symbolism that is inherently political (Hultquist 2016, 762).

Another theoretical tool essential for an understanding and analysis of Behn’s story is the concept of “public sphere”. The act of writing and publishing this story on the subject of the interiority of women (i.e. their secrecy) in itself stands as an act of participation in the public sphere. Anne Coldiron (2004: 207) references the “public sphere of early print”, a concept which is also taken up by Martine van Elk (2017: 7). With regard to Isabella's flight, of great relevance is the concept introduced by Jürgen Habermas and modified by Michael McKeon (2006: 73), specifically that: “The most visible case in point regarding the inclusiveness of the emergent public sphere is that of women”. The root of the concept can be found in Habermas (1962: 36-37). Tita Chico (2005: 127) examines the concept of “public display of femininity,” applying it to *The Rover*.

2. Isabella's gender(s) within the evolution of the narrative

What makes a good girl transform into a bad girl? This is the basic point of departure. How can she be both devoutly religious and a murderess? Why does a *mulier bona* end up converted into a *femme fatale*? What are the reasons behind the protagonist's decision to abandon her religious life and devote herself to worldly pleasures? This transition of the beautiful votary is not merely an act of dedication to earthly pleasures; nor is it simply a rejection, motivated by *vanitas*, of the devout and protective life of the religious community. This striking pattern of behaviour shown by the female protagonist is rooted in the search for “happiness at the nexus of the public and the private” (Doddy 1997: 263), a frequent element in the novels of the coming century.

The first key event in the narrative is that Isabella's father is widowed, the child losing her mother at the tender age of two. With the loss of the mother, the figure traditionally associated with the care of the family disappears. Isabella's father decides to take her to a convent where his sister is the Abbess. The *pater familias*, seeing his wife taken away from him and the domestic order of family life threatened, decides to take his daughter to the monastery³ where he aims to compensate for the loss of familial protection caused by the death of her mother. The father, (Count Henrick de Vallary), unable to guarantee that the desired values will be instilled in his daughter under these conditions, removes his daughter from the family home at the death of her mother. He also elects to dedicate himself to a monastic life, entering into the order of the Jesuits: “he resolv'd [...] to take Holy Orders; and, without considering, that, possibly, the young *Isabella*, when she grew to Woman, might have Sentiments contrary to those that now possess him, he design'd she should also become a Nun” (Behn 1995: 213). This quotation illustrates that the father makes decisions without any consideration for the wishes of the protagonist, at that time or in the future.

The first half of the story presents Isabella complying with the traditional female gender role of her time, accepting the decision made by her father and entering into the monastery at Ypres. The passive voice of the following sentence points to the objectification of the protagonist, through its two verbal phrases: “The little *Isabella* was carried [...] into the Nunnery, and was receiv'd as a very diverting Companion [...]” (Behn 1995: 213-4). This idea

³ The monastery is also characterized in other Behnian works as a place of shelter and refuge; an illustration of this can be seen in the decisions of Calista and Octavio to devote the rest of their life to the monastic and religious commitment, in the second part of her early work entitled *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (published in three volumes, 1684, 1685 and 1687).

of manipulation is reinforced when Lady Abbess, her aunt, applies all possible means to make her a nun: “she us’d all her Arts and Stratagems to make her become a *Nun*” (Behn 1995: 214).

Another similar episode concerns the nun Katteriena, who relates the story herself in direct speech. At the age of thirteen, Katteriena fell in love with the handsome servant Arnaldo. Their romance was discovered when her father found one of the letters they had been sending to one another. The narrator describes “her Father finding out the Intrigue, which fatally happen’d to be with his own Page” and the nun Katteriena explains “my Heart would heave, when e’re I look’d upon the young Arnaldo [...] having by chance lost one my my Billets” (Behn 1995: 223). The parental response was immediate: he banished Arnaldo and forced his daughter to enter into a convent: “was sent to travel, and my self forc’d into his Monastery” (Behn 1995: 224).

The semantics of this preliminary stage take place in the family home and the convent, two settings which are both deeply significant. These two settings are symbols of domesticity and reclusion in contrast to worldly life where such protection does not feature. They are also symbols of nurturing (represented in the home by her mother; in the monastery by the religious community) required for the upbringing of a child within society. The family home and the convent are images of submission and obedience. The act of handing his daughter over to a religious order is done to ensure that she is brought up in the correct manner, with rectitude and purity, and so that she might continue to grow under the care of the nurturing figure - which in this new setting is embodied by her aunt, the Lady Abbess. Isabella first obeys her father's will and subsequently follows the will of the Abbess.

The protagonist, blessed with beauty and intelligence, attracts the attention of the local boys as she walks in the grounds of the convent; meanwhile she continues to keep her religious vows. The narrator emphasizes her beauty using superlative adjectives and a vast array of attributes: “being pretty tall of Stature, with the finest Shape [...], with all the Adornment of a perfet brown-hair’d Beauty, Eyes black and lovely, Complexion fair; to a Miracle, all her Features of the rarest proportioun, the Mouth red, the Teeth white, and a thousand Graces in her Meen and Air [...]” (Behn 1995: 215).

The semantics of the story emphasise the attractive qualities of the young novice, who is presented literally and on several occasions as an object of desire, a “charming object” (Behn 1995: 221). Her mere appearance in the outside world gives rise to a dramatic transformation in the novice, as she falls in love with the noble young Villenoy. The emergence of “conflicting desires” is notable through the transition from “virgin ignorance” to a “deceitful, ravenous desirer” (Hultquist 2015: 488). In this way, the story depicts the intense internal conflict

experienced by a young woman who falls in love, first with the soldier Villenoy (who sends her several love letters), and later with Bernardo Henault. In her efforts to restrain her burning passion she is deeply tormented, eventually even falling sick. And yet, “the more she conceal’d her Flame, the more violently it rag’d” (Behn 1995: 225).

Midway through the narrative, Isabella undergoes a form of gender reversal. She begins to challenge established principles and rebels against her religious life (vows), against her catholic celibacy (virtue) and the decisions made by her father (honour) from the moment she confesses her love to Henault: “[...] all things occurring to her desire [...] she entertain’d him with the good News, and told him, She had at last vanquish’d her Heart in favour of him, and loving him above all things, Honour, hew Vow or Reputation, had resolv’d to abandon her self wholly to him [...]” (Behn 1995: 236).

Isabella decides to flee the monastery, acting on her desires and actively pursuing her own happiness, a challenging and defiant form of behaviour that persists until the end of the story: “[...] having acquainted *Henault*, with the Day and Hour of her Escape, he got together what he could, and waiting for her, with his Coach, one Night, when no body was awake but her self, when rising softly, [...] she stole so dexterously out of the Monastery, as no body knew any thing of it” (Behn 1995: 238). In this way, a transgressive female agency begins to develop which is totally contrary to her previously submissive behaviour. Isabella herself decides the date and time for her escape; in so doing, she marks a turning point in the development of events. She then tears off her habit, concealing it in a hole in the ground and covering it over with a broom.

Isabella and Henault eventually reach the banks of the Rhine. They change their names, giving rise to a shift in characterization: “and went [...] to a little town upon the River Rhine, where, changing their Names, they were forthwith married, and took a House in a Country village, a Farm, where they resolv’d to live retir’d, by the Name of *Beroone*” (Behn 1995: 239). They live off the farm, in a transition which points to a complete metamorphosis of character. Isabella changes, and her status changes as well due to these personal mutations. Following several internal diatribes, Henault goes off to war. When the protagonist learns of the (supposed) death of Henault, she marries Villenoy, who had come to town to visit her. Isabella's actions eventually earn the acquiescence of her aunt the abbess, as well as the approval of the Bishop, implying that female agency was convincingly capable of persuading traditional figureheads of the patriarchal *status quo*.

When Henault - who had been given up for dead - returns to Isabella's house while Villenoy is out hunting, Isabella feeds him, puts him to bed and goes to pray. Later, in an

attempt to put an end to the disgrace and dishonour of being an adulterer, she kills him, suffocating him with a pillow. In this way, the protagonist acts to remove the obstacles to her own happiness and avoid shame and suffering. Consumed by guilt, Isabella faints when Villenoy returns to the farm.

Prepared to safeguard Isabella's honour and their own happiness, Villenoy attempts to conceal Henault's death by hiding his body in a sack. The protagonist makes an alternative proposal, "her Damnable Design" (Behn 1995: 254), which secretly involves the death of Villenoy as well. While helping to conceal Henault's clothing within the sack, Isabella sews it to Villenoy's coat (an idea that the narrator reiterates four times in the final part of the text). She suggests that Villenoy should throw the body from the bridge, making sure not to let it become stuck on the side of the bridge as it falls. When Villenoy throws Henault's body into the river he is dragged in as well, sinking to the bottom and drowning.

The two corpses are later found and taken to the Town Hall, where the body of Villenoy is identified and brought to his house. Isabella, racked with guilt and remorse for her actions, faints repeatedly upon seeing the body. Her reputation for piety and holiness initially masks Isabella's involvement in the deaths, until a French gentleman who had been enslaved with Henault identifies his body. Isabella is summoned by the local magistrate and confesses to the double murder of her two beloved husbands. She is sentenced to be beheaded, and yet on the day of her execution she appears with joy and peace of mind: "[...] very Majestick and charming, and a Face so surprizing Fair, where no Languishment or Fear appear'd, but all Cheerful as a Bride, that she set all Hearts a flaming, even in that mortifying Minute of Preparation for Death" (Behn 1995: 257). The legal context of the incident is evident in the conviction and sentencing to death of the protagonist.

Behn does not confine herself merely to the novelized representation of infidelity and bigamy. Instead, she uses these thematic resources to reflect female desire and to break the silence enveloping women of her time, to shatter the established discourse relating to femininity as a cultural phenomenon. Behn does not shy away from the equation between women and their culturally-imposed destiny. She seeks a new social configuration and a more liberated approach to the role of femininity within society.

The writer would have had sufficient material to compose a successful tale with nothing but the protagonist's internal debate accompanying her escape, within the "tradition of lascivious convent anecdote" (Shell 1996: 44). This is evident in the presentation of scandalous episodes in the newspapers of the time and the widespread consumption of this type of news by

the reading public⁴. But Aphra Behn does not limit herself to conveying this type of story *per se*. Behn goes beyond the framework of commitment, infidelity and the discourse of seduction (although she also makes use of these elements) and instead bases her female-authored gendered discourse on the innate power of women.

3. Isabella's transformations: "Yes, I am another Woman now"

In *The History of a Nun* there is an observable transformation in the protagonist, Isabella. She shifts from the immaculate life of the convent (female agency in the framework of established patriarchal canons) to the worldly life of a married woman (subversive female agency) to a double murderer by the end of the narrative. Isabella did not enter the monastery of her own free will, but ultimately it is her will that must be imposed. Her transition from naive young novice to rebellious woman, a sinner and offender, is implemented by a transformation of character, a metamorphosis of characterization and a change in her social status. Patriarchal female agency transforms into a subversive and transgressive female agency.

The evocative and equivocal diction and syntax subvert the traditional representation of women, illustrating, within traditional coordinates, "the weakness of human nature" that emerges as an inevitable consequence of feminine desire. Isabella confesses to Katteriena her feelings about her brother using religious language, in the first person singular: "But all my Prayers are vain, your lovely Brother persues me into the greatest Solitude; he meets me at my very Midnight Devotions, and interrupts my Prayers; he gives me a thousand thoughts, that ought not to enter into a Soul dedicated to Heaven; he ruins my Glory I have achiev'd, even above my Sex" (Behn 1995: 224). The narrator goes further than the protagonist in describing Isabella's sentiments regarding Henault - preceded by the metaphor "Oyl to the Fire" (Behn 1995: 225) - through the following sentence in which the use of isochronism, the alliteration of nasal phonemes and the six iterations of the adverb are notable, as well as the alliteration of the voiceless glottal fricative /h/:

She was eternally thinking on him, how handsome his Face, how delicate every Feature, how charming his Air, how graceful his meen, how soft and good his Disposition, and how witty and entertaining his Conversation. She now fancy'd, she was at the *Grate*, talking to him as she us'd to be, [...] that she is more destin'd to be so Happy, then gives a loose to Grief; Griefs, at which, no Mortals, but Despairing Lovers,

⁴ An example of this is the elopement of Lady Henrietta Berkeley with her brother-in-law Lord Grey of Werke. Henrietta's father announced in the *London Gazette*, in September 1682, that he was offering a reward of 200 pounds to anyone able to offer information about her disappearance. This event is reflected in the fictional universe of *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*.

can guess, or how tormenting they are; where the most easie Moments are, those, wherein one resolves to kill ones self, and the happiest Thought is Damnation; but from these Imaginations, she endeavours to fly, all frighted with horror; but, alas! Whither would she fly, but to a Life more full of horror? (Behn 1995: 225).

So, a semantics of horror and torment - deriving from the protagonist's inner conflict and presented through a language of violence - contrasts starkly with explicit allusions to love, as well as resonances of pleasure and onanism: "She [...] finds it imposible to cure her Despair; she cannot fly from the Thoughts of the Charming *Henault*, and 'tis imposible to quit 'em; [...] force her Hand to commit a Murder upon her self" (Behn 1995: 225-6). The narrator also defines the episode as "this shameful Feaver of Love, that was destroying her within" (Behn 1995: 226). Leaving no room for doubt, Aphra Behn has the narrator give a description of Isabella shortly afterwards, in which her physical state and position on a bed receive particular emphasis. The allusion is rendered all the more explicit through the use of diphthongs, long vowels and nasal phonemes:

When she had rag'd and struggled with this unruly Passion, 'till she was quite tir'd and breathless, finding all her force in vain, she fill'd her fancy with a thousand charming *Idea*'s of the lovely *Henault*, and, in that self fit, had a mind to satisfy her panting Heart, and give it one Joy more, by beholding the Lord of its Desires, and yet the Author of its Pains: pleas'd, yet trembling, at this Revolve, she rose from the Bed where she was laid [...]. (Behn 1995: 226)

In this way, the author conveys Isabella's internal state to the reader, eloquently contrasting her restrained direct speech (using an ambiguous, religious vocabulary) with the narrative voice in the third person, which explores the same episode in greater depth and detail.

The inner struggle of the protagonist, which ends with her deciding to express her willingness and desire, represents an "ethical and epistemological contradiction in mind" and generates "acute psychological" (Ballaster 1993: 193) dilemmas throughout the work and in every one of the decisions made by Isabella. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that Laura Linker (2011: 43) considers *The History of the Nun* to be "the most complex shorter narrative that Behn writes" arguing that „she continues to complicate the female libertine figure by concentrating on Isabella's psychological and emotional pain."

Isabella's gender reversal and the change of status which she undergoes over the course of the novel is clearly pointed to at various stages in the narrative, for example when she confesses to her roommate Katteriena "[...] what cause my change of Colour proceeds", to

which she replies “I fear, ‘tis Love” (Behn 1995: 222), going on to tell her “I love! I love! And feel those differing Passions!” (Behn 1995: 223). Subsequently, Isabella tries to conceal her change in state from Katteriena “with her Woman’s Skill, begins to practise an Art she never before understood” (Behn 1995: 227). This transformation of character is verbalised by the protagonist, who defines the alterations she is experiencing and, in so doing, establishes a turning point in the narrative marked by these changes in personality: “Yes, I am another Woman now” (Behn 1995: 228).

The nun makes good her escape from the monastery. Thus, Isabella passes from the private sphere to the “male-dominated public sphere” (Elk 2017: 18), starting her agency as a nonconformist woman. This act represents the flight of the woman from subordination and submission to an imposed hierarchy; it represents the implementation of Isabella's own personal will, choosing to act upon her own feelings and at her own discretion. The young woman is compelled to leave the convent, to escape to the world outside to give free rein to her own free will. She must liberate herself and become truly independent. The manner in which she leaves the monastery (a symbol of social mores) must necessarily be clandestine and take place at night. The significance of this detail is considerable when we take into account the fact that the Abbess (a synecdoche of established society) is her aunt. Isabella, aware of the likely reaction of her aunt (a synecdoche of the family) does not consult her or ask her permission before making this vital decision.

She chooses the only option available in her time and context for her personal development, for her *Bildungsroman*. To support part of her own personal well-being, Isabella is forced to break the rules, break free from the convent walls and escape unnoticed. Her behaviour is that of the *fait accompli*, breaking the vows she formerly made towards the religious life in a dramatic manner.

We may infer that by breaking with tradition and established societal rules, the figure of Isabella becomes sinful, an offender; accordingly, the act of refusing to follow the dictates of religious, social and political authority causes a direct threat, not only to her own life but also that of her unborn child. Behn presents the consequences of not remaining within the *status quo*, within the limits of traditional morality - reflected in Isabella's vows as a nun - and the consequences of acting against established laws. There is also the implication that by following the dictates of her reason and heart this young woman manages to live a few happy years, inwardly peaceful and content; however, ultimately, this determined implementation of female agency is the catalyst for her utter ruin, costing not only her happiness but also her life. The effort and achievement of “*self-governance*” is promoted by her “own destructive appetites”,

which are externalised, “projected and reified as a threatening monstrous ‘other’” (Herbert & Walters 2002: 4).

A good woman must transform into a she-devil; the pious devotee must become a murderess, if she is to achieve her own goals in seventeenth century society. Behn presents us with “the conflicting tensions of the perfect woman: she is both a pious nun [...] and a sexually desired subject who leaves the monastery to marry” (Hultquist 2015: 488). The transformation of the protagonist is a necessary condition to confront and overcome the existing framework of femininity. The implementation of her free will lead - ultimately and inescapably - to the utmost tragedy. To enact this free will, Isabella must break free from the convent, a powerful symbol of protection, submission and imprisonment. The conceptions of two types of behaviour (obedience and piety in contrast to disobedience and wilfulness) are well represented in this work as well as the consequences of not acknowledging total submission to established social and moral standards.

In the words of Aleksandra Hultquist (2015: 485), Isabella “struggles with desire, and the social implications of expressing desire.” Isabella challenges several established orders: familial order, moral order and religious order. This part of the story illustrates a contravention of the will of Isabella's father, as well as an act of rebellion against her aunt. Moreover, it also amounts to a scandal in terms of social *decorum*, and even a sin for having breached the religious vows formerly professed, by abandoning the sacred place where she lived and to which she had been committed. These events amount to a “dismantling of gender as a transhistorical and transcultural ‘given’” (Herbert & Walters 2002: 3).

Femininity as a social construct is destabilised, shattered and subverted by the loyalty shown by Behn's female protagonist to her own principles and the dictates of her own heart. Some critics have argued that the short fiction “celebrates female virtues” (Pearson 1988: 150). Female agency requires a courageous woman to attack the established social reality; nonetheless the pursuance of her personal ambitions ends in tragedy. To achieve her own objectives she must become a criminal and a murderer. Isabella is the embodiment of female rebellion, a protest against female passivity. The way in which she finally achieves this is by acts of disobedience (breaking her vows, and a polygamous marriage); she becomes sinful and even murderous, since in order to achieve her ends she must “transgress” the rigid and deeply rooted androcentric customs. Behn generates a “narrative of sensibility” in which the protagonist is transformed into a “pathos figure overcome with sensibility in her varied stages of anguish” (Linker 2011: 44).

The author portrays a “witty ‘masculine’ female character” (Nussbaum 2003: 61) whose story becomes the central theme of the narrative. Isabella's behaviour is an example of “role-reversal,” “a sort of transvestism” and a “transgressiveness” since “the very term “female rake” privileges man as the norm, making women a variation of that norm.” Catherine Craft-Fairchild (1993: 9-11) confirms that if the literature of the time “depicted men as predatory and aggressive, the early women writers often compensated by creating “female rakes” who were equally amorous and belligerent”, as in the case of Isabella.

Isabella prefers impurity⁵ over purity, activity over passivity, monstrosity over the pristine, contrived image of women typical within society. The moral consequence of this is that she sins several times: in breaking her religious vows (infidelity) and by marrying twice (bigamy). With the breaking of her oaths (both in sinning and committing a criminal act), the life of the protagonist leads inevitably to tragedy, and to her execution. In the words of Pearson (1993: 237), “Isabella is transformed from an active sinner to a passive sufferer”.

Still, there are also other practical consequences in terms of personal development. Isabella acts out her thoughts and desires to safeguard her free will and personal happiness, developing in this manner a “sympathetic frame” (Mathews 2012: 3). The protagonist finds a “sympathetic community [...]” to “alleviate her grief” caused by her “decidedly act of aggression towards her husbands” (Linker 2011: 44). Ultimately, the use of a female narrator and a female protagonist (developed by a female writer) (Saxton 2009: 33) “draws attention to the injustices women of the time held in common, and rebellion against these injustices unites author, narrator, protagonist, and reader” (Mathews 2012: 3).

Isabella and Henault see themselves as criminals (having broken the law) and disobedient children (having acted against the wishes of their parents): “to get their Pardon, as Criminals, first, that had transgress’d the Law; and, next, as disobedient Persons, who had done contrary to the Will and Desire of their Parents” (Behn 1995: 239). Soon after they arrive at the farm, the cattle die, crops fail, the horses are killed and the granaries burn down, as if it were all a kind of divine punishment for their actions. Then, Isabella suffers a miscarriage when she learns that Henault intends to join the war against the Turks. Again, the occurrence may be understood as a punishment for Isabella's boldness in implementing free will and acting on her desires rather than following the dictates of society. However, the narrative examines - and ultimately supports - the changing characterisation provoked by Isabella's shift in personality. The fact

⁵ It is not the first time Behn draws this kind of monstrous and violent character. An episode of violence by the female protagonist (Miranda) is found in *The Fair Jilt* in the “violation-confession scene” against Father Francisco, against “an authority figure” (Figueroa-Dorrego 2011: 100).

that Isabella is a sinner in the eyes of the Church for pursuing her own desires (and in the eyes of Henault's father, a significant paternal voice) does not presuppose that the narrative supports this view that any woman who acts on her own impulses is a sinner.

In this respect, the narrative destabilises the patriarchal social norms and endorses the protagonist's adherence to a feminocentric set of values. It should be noted regarding this that in the dedicatory letter to the duchess of Mazarin, Aphra Behn implores her to offer her protagonist compassion, if not her protection. This detail offers a key to the interpretation of Isabella as an emotional, empathetic character.

4. Demystifying mythologies of femininity: Female monstrosity and its punishments

With regard to Isabella's two marriages, it is important to note that they are not depicted in terms of religious ceremony, since this would be incompatible with her status as a nun who has severed her ties with the Catholic Church and broken her vow of celibacy. Nor does her father give his approval of his daughter's relationships or bestow his blessing on the marriages. It is very telling that neither the paternal voice (being a symbol of the family, the head of the hierarchical pyramid and therefore a figure to which Isabella, as his daughter, would traditionally be submissive) nor the religious blessing (symbol of established society and established customs) appear in these decisions. This further challenges the convention that considered "unchurched marriages"⁶ to be inadequate or illegitimate (Hogue 1999: 316). The father is silenced, seemingly wiped off the narrative map by the writer, and this with a clear purpose: so that the protagonist might become owner and executor of her own plans. It is a way of presenting a woman's personal progress, unfettered by contemporary social restrictions. With the breaking of Isabella's religious vows⁷, there follows the clandestine union of the two lovers, who "evaded public scrutiny provided by banns and the administrative vetting associated with licences, and escaped the church's control of the ceremony" (Cressy 1999: 322).

The narrative begins by establishing that "violated vows [...] never go unpunished" (Behn 1995: 211). Isabella escapes the convent with her second admirer (Henault); she lives happily

⁶ In the words of Margaret J. M. Ezell (2017: 293) "*The Fair Jilt* and *The History of the Nun* [are] set in continental nunneries." The story describes Ypres as "a Town not long since, in the Dominions of the King of *Spain*, and now in possession of the King of *France*" (Behn 1995: 213). The study carried out by Cressy (1999) focuses on the context of English religion during this period. Although Behn wisely located the convent in Belgium (which had a predominantly Catholic population and numerous convents), the story nevertheless serves to illustrate contemporary English moral and social coordinates, specifically those of English readers at that time, who would have been the immediate recipients of Behn's work.

⁷ These scenes suggest the need for further research into the function and consideration of Catholic rites in Stuart England, as "the early Church of England was largely successful in its campaign to control the ceremonies of family formation" (Cressy 1999: 316).

with him for a while, until the young man goes off to war. Isabella becomes pregnant; however when her husband tells her that he must go to war⁸ she almost faints; the news “possess’d her with so intire a Grief, that she miscarry’d, to the insupportable Torment of the tender Husband and Lover” (Behn 1995: 241).

The episode of the protagonist's miscarriage should not be seen as a mere adjunct to the development of the plot. We must bear in mind that in other works, female courage is punished; for example in “The Dumb Virgin”⁹, a woman who goes on a sea voyage for the sake of enjoyment and exploration loses a son at sea and later, the two daughters that she gives birth to are born with disabilities¹⁰ (Torralbo 2017). Isabella's abortion should be understood within this semantic context as a punishment against the young woman who decided to break her religious vows. It may also be seen as a punishment against Henault: he did not truly wish to go to fight, but in order to reach the decision to do so, he “overcame his heart” (Behn 1995: 242). This cause-and-effect relationship was discussed by Francis Bacon (2012: 426) in 1612, who concluded that “Ubi peccat in uno, periclitatur in altero” while in 1697 Thomas Pope Blount (217) warned, “a deformed Body was a true Index of a deformed Mind, or an ill Nature.” The antiquated tradition, that viewed the ‘sins’ of the mother to be reflected in the physical deformities of the child, is brought to the greatest possible extremity in *The History of the Nun*, since Isabella’s child dies before birth.

On the one hand, the woman who rebels against the establishment has her hopes for a family rudely snatched from her by the miscarriage, the chance to extend her own line by having a family prematurely eliminated. On the other hand, Henault's decision is also punished because he does not respond to his own will but to that of his father and even Isabella's aunt, who insists that he should assume the responsibility “to satisfy his Duty, it being absolutely necessary for the wiping off the Stain of his Sacrilege” (Behn 1995: 241). It may be inferred that the conjugal

⁸ The text specifies that Henault must either go to fight for the Venetians against the Turks or in the service of the French (Behn 1995: 241). Ultimately, he decides “to carry the first Efforts of his Arms against the common Foes of Christendom, the Turks” (Behn 1995: 242).

⁹ This short fiction was published under Behn’s name, although its attribution to Behn was questioned by Germaine Greer (1995: 190), Janet Todd (1996: 317), and Leah Orr (2013: 30). The stories published towards the end of the century under Behn’s name (“The Unfortunate Bride, or The Blind Lady A Beauty. A Novel,” “The Dumb Virgin; or, The Force of Imagination. A Novel,” “The Unfortunate Happy Lady. A True History,” “The Wandering Beauty. A Novel,” and “The Unhappy Mistake”) all share certain thematic elements as well as showing similarities to other Behnian tales published earlier; however we believe that these parallels reflect, firstly, the literary conventions of the time and, secondly, that the author wanted to maintain a certain symmetry with the amatory fiction composed by Aphra Behn to great commercial success. Our conclusion, therefore, which remains provisional until the group editing the forthcoming *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Aphra Behn* (Elaine Hobby, Claire Bowditch, Mel Evans and Gillian Wright, among other renowned scholars) conclusively establish the fact, is that these five stories were not written by Behn.

¹⁰ This allows us to suggest a rhetoric of deformity in the work of Aphra Behn, one which arguably merits a thorough study.

union between Isabella and Henault represents the sin of the nun against chastity and against the celibacy of the Catholic order of nuns; consequently, nature punishes them with the loss of their *nasciturus*. It may be also understood that Henault's submission to paternal hierarchy and the power of the Church (as represented by Isabella's aunt, the nun) is similarly punished.

Eventually, Henault goes to war; later Isabella receives news that he has died in battle. Isabella subsequently marries her first lover, Villenoy; together they enjoy five years of happiness. The protagonist's pious, happy nature is revealed both during her time in the convent as well as later in her two periods of married life. We may conclude that Aphra Behn aimed to depict a female protagonist capable of finding joy on her own terms and expressing her independence in monastic life as well as in the domestic sphere that she subsequently chooses to adopt.

Her union with Villenoy should be regarded as the involuntary "second bigamous marriage" (Pearson 2004: 194), as the protagonist had been informed of Henault's death. However, Henault suddenly appears in Isabella's house while Villenoy is out hunting. Henault was unrecognizable¹¹. He looked terrible, having been close to death for some time following the battle; however, he had been captured by the enemy and was later sold as a slave to a Turk in the hope of receiving a ransom¹². The protagonist gives him food and lets him rest, after which she decides to kill him: "she resolv'd upon the Murder of Henault as the only means of removing all Obstacles to her future Happiness" (Behn 1995: 251). This beautiful, devout young woman of good family has become a killer, a homicidal character: "she goes to the Bed of the Unfortunate Henault, with a Penknife in her hand [...] she resolves to Strangle him, or Smother him with a Pillow; that last Thought was no sooner borne, but put in Execution" (Behn 1995: 251).

The secularized nun, who had always acted in accordance with her own principles and followed the dictates of her heart, kills the man who was once her husband to safeguard the

¹¹ With the arrival of the unknown visitor, bearded and unrecognizable, it is worth drawing attention to the strategy of carnivalization of the characters, which Behn had applied so successfully and with such great mastery in *The Rover*, in the two disguises of Hellena in her pursuit of Willmore: as a gypsy and as a page boy. Ultimately, this is a convention of Restoration literature. This disguising of identity appears here as the visitor arrives at the house of his former wife and is initially treated as an unknown. Readers interested in this dramatic tradition may consult the paper by Juan A. Prieto-Pablos (2012: 69-91).

¹² The realism of this detail has been established by, among others, Maureen Duffy (1989, 113) who points to the existence of news bulletins for she used these events later as background material for *The History of the Nun*. The concept of "truth-telling," as categorized by Sonia Villegas (2006: 207, 213), can be applied to the "veracity" in this episode. Jorge Figueroa-Dorrego (1999: 49) confirmed that the narrators of these short fictions guarantee the veracity of the narrative events.

happiness she has found with her second husband, suffocating him (Henault) with a pillow¹³. She then goes on to devise the plan whereby her second husband Villenoy will also die, drowned in the river along with Henault's body. When Villenoy returns from hunting, he helps her with "her Damnable Design" (Behn 1995: 254) to hide Henault's lifeless body. She sewed the sack in which Villenoy will carry his body to the river and thus dispose of him.

The 'tools' with which she fulfils her desires and carries out her monstrous violence¹⁴ (her crimes) are highly significant metaphors for the domestic, private sphere: in the first instance, she uses a pillow; in the second, "the Pack-needle with the Thread." This depiction of female violence goes beyond the purely legal or moral issue; instead it "functions as a crucial site for competing ideologies and mythologies of femininity" (Saxton 2009: 11). The pillow and the "great Needle, with a Pack-thread" are symbols of the home and are, moreover, extremely emphatic gendered symbols that eloquently illustrate Isabella's transgression against tradition female roles within society. They are unprecedented gendered metaphors of domesticity, "of sewing" or "of needlework" (Pearson 1993: 247, 249) that confirm the noticeable female determination.

The narrator makes plain the protagonist's abominable actions when she describes "so great a Barbarity as she had committed" (Behn 1995: 254). Isabella even verbalizes this in direct speech: "No [...] it is but just, I should forever wake, who have, in one fatal Night, destroy'd two such Innocents" (Behn 1995: 254). These episodes show the protagonist as a "female criminal subject"¹⁵ (Saxton 2009: 32) who acts on her own impulses, defending her individuality and integrity against a society that considers her an adulterer. Isabella's actions lead her from happiness into intense suffering, but these actions are committed in pursuit of her desires. Within the social structure of the domestic, private sphere and the established patriarchy on a larger scale, it becomes clear that the protagonist's actions do in fact achieve their desired goals. However, they also ultimately lead to suffering and death, for a woman who attempts to apply her own free will is - in this context - a 'monster'. Her flouting of traditional customs, laws and social norms is in itself a threat to society and as such, she cannot be allowed to survive; she is ultimately condemned and beheaded.

¹³ The act of killing Henault with the pillow is a gendered tool. Isabella went to the bedroom carrying a knife, but as she did not know how she would hide the blood if she were to kill him in this way, she decided instead to go for the more subtle method of suffocation using the pillow.

¹⁴ The reader interested in the concept of monstrosity challenging gender roles may consult the work by Pilar Cuder-Domínguez (2006: 57-72) on *The Tragedy of Miriam*.

¹⁵ This short fiction is more than "apparently a hyperbolic and darkly witty story of a woman who kills to get what she wants" (Saxton 2009).

The “Fair-Vow-Breaker” is a double murderer. She expresses this herself: “I [...] destroy’d two such Innocents” (Behn 1995: 254). Her own reflection marks an inflection point in her own life: “It was not many Hours since I thought my self the most happy and blest of Women, and now am fallen to the Misery of one of the worst Friends of Hell” (Behn 1995: 254). In this way, the metamorphosis from fortune to misfortune is made evident. The narrator’s voice reflects her torment¹⁶: “she [...] really all the Pangs of Killing Grief” (Behn 1995: 255). Her actions are defined as “cruelty.”

The protagonist receives her punishment when she comes to the city. In the manner of a *deus ex machina*, a French knight who happened to have been a companion of Henault in slavery, reveals that the other corpse is in fact Isabella’s first husband (they subsequently disinter the body, which is shaved by a barber and it is revealed that the features match those of Henault). Isabella is summarily judged, convicted and beheaded “as the Murderess of two Husbands (both belov’d) in one Night” (Behn 1995: 257). First betrayed by a member of society, she is then interrogated by a judge, upon which she confesses everything and is accused. She is convicted and condemned to be beheaded. It is therefore the social order which she had altered (and that Behn aims to subvert) that instigates and carries out her judgement; society reacts with swift justice against those who act contrary to the established rules. This supports the observation made by Catherine Craft-Fairchild (1993: 11) that “the woman’s transgressiveness is usually contained and controlled at the end of the narrative through her confinement, exile, or death [...] Isabella, *The Fair Vow-Breaker*, is condemned to destruction.”

The two murders that take place in the novel allow us to conceptualize the deeds of the protagonist as crimes. The first is carried out with malicious intent, consciously. The second is also voluntary since it happens intentionally. So, the woman who in the first phase of her life had rebelled against moral or religious standards (as an anomaly and an abnormality, opposed to established *decorum*) in the later stage of her life acts against these same social rules and customs by claiming the lives of two people (becoming a monstrosity). Transgressing religious morality, the woman suffers (as a natural punishment) the abortion of her unborn child and consequently the extinction of the family line, thus ensuring the non-continuation of this type of behaviour in society. With the death of her child, her family line also comes to an end. In addition, the woman who dared to transgress the established bounds of normality, who deviated

¹⁶ Isabella, “the fair Mourner” (Behn 1995: 256), faints when she sees the body of Villenoy, which has been placed on a table in their home: “she [...] would be led to see this dreadful Victim of her Cruelty, and coming near the Table, the Body, whose Eyes were before close shut, now open’d themselves wide, and fix’d them on *Isabella*, who, giving a great Schreek, fell down in a swoon, and the Eyes clos’d again” (Behn 1995: 256).

from the authoritatively governed canons of female conduct, ends up being executed as a violent criminal.

According to Elizabeth J. Mathews (2012: 2) “the text suggests that Isabella is [...] a victim of forces beyond her control”. According to the study carried out by Laura Linker (2011: 43) *The History of the Nun* presents a symbiosis between “libertine aggression” and “*sensibilité*” embodied in “Isabella’s sorrow” and her “need for community to share her grief.” In keeping with Hultquist (2015: 488) we may deduce that “Isabella’s *desires* are *not* the problems” since (given the context established by the author) Isabella “is right to take the nun’s vows, and to love both Henault and Villenoy”. In fact, it is Isabella’s complicity with patriarchal social conventions that lead to her death, “and her story ends paradoxically in madness and violence as well as in morality and forgiveness.”

The ramifications of Isabella’s actions are reflected within the narrative along two lines. Firstly, we see her behaviour within the context of society; secondly, her behaviour is depicted in terms of her own thoughts and system of values. On the one hand, the protagonist confesses to her crimes in court and considers her misdeeds to be deserving of even more severe punishment; on the other hand, however, Isabella’s state of mind is unwavering throughout the trial. She receives the sentence happily and shows absolutely no fear on the day of her execution. This dichotomy illustrates the different consequences of the protagonist’s behaviour and the decision she makes. Firstly, it reflects her remorse for the crimes she committed that inevitably lead to her downfall and death, in keeping with the established social rules. This first dimension outlines the logic of patriarchal social values and the consequences of transgressing them. The second dimension aligns Isabella’s behaviour with feminocentric values and a female perspective, through her conscious actions that reflect her status as a woman capable of thinking and acting for herself. The very fact of having acted according to her own wishes gives rise to her remarkable mental stability, even though these actions also lead inevitably to her death.

5. Isabella’s loyalist martyrdom

Isabella’s martyrdom - a direct result of enacting her own feminocentric desires - correlates with the fate of Charles I, who was executed by the Puritan theocrats who overthrew him. In this way, Behn elevates the ontology of the events described in the narrative, attributing to them an almost historiographical relevance. Charles I and Isabella are both tried and executed in similar circumstances. The parallelism of the two events permits a correlation between the actions and fate of the historical king and those of the story’s protagonist. Consequently, Isabella’s behaviour and the decisions she makes are elevated, taking on a symbolic significance

whereby she becomes a synecdoche for all women of the period. The key to this interpretation is revealed in Isabella's final scene, which is a clear reflection of the execution of Charles I, whose death also followed an eloquent speech in the presence of the executioner.

The execution of the king and Isabella's beheading are both carried out as a public spectacle, "a scene of public mourning" (Hultquist 2015: 491). This conclusion may be drawn given the ties that the author had to the house of Stuart; she is known to have been sent to Antwerp as a spy by Charles II, the son of the beheaded King. It may be concluded that Isabella's actions (female agency) were so sublime and significant that, accordingly, she was punished in the same manner as Charles I. The inherent symmetry equates the actions of Isabella with those of the king. Both swear allegiance and make vows; those of Charles I being political (Mortimer 2017: 3), Isabella's of a religious nature. The two die defending their ideals. The final correlations are these: Charles I was executed for his ideology (as a royalist) and for his behaviour in power which his adversaries (the Roundheads or the Parliamentarians) considered to be a threat to the political and social stability of England; Isabella was executed for her will (as an independent female) and for her deeds.

Andrew McRae and John West (2017: 243) have studied Aphra Behn as "one of the most prolific panegyrist of the later Stuart period." To further emphasise the writer's affiliations with the house of Stuart¹⁷, it need only be mentioned that the addressee of the preliminary letter, the Duchess of Mazarine¹⁸, considered "a female libertine" by Laura Linker (2011: 2) was a mistress of Charles II and the niece of a French cardinal. In this respect O'Donnell (1996: 294) confirms that the subtitle of the story, *The Fair Vow-Breaker*, is full of irony since "Mancini had fled France to avoid the stifling religious hypocrisy of her husband and found refuge in the Court and the bed of Charles II." The identification of the narrator¹⁹ with the protagonist appears from the beginning when the narrator confirms that she too had been "a humble votary in the house of devotion." This is an example of the "alignment of the narrator" (Saxton 2009: 33)²⁰.

¹⁷ Eric B. Song (2013: 683) has studied the Christian martyrdom of Oroonoko and its echo of the execution of Charles I.

¹⁸ Readers interested in the life of Duchess Mazarine can refer to the work of Toivo David Rosvall, *Mazarine Legacy: The Life of Hortense Mancini, duchess Mazarine*, New York, 1969. Some experts including Maureen Duffy (1989: 286) point to the dedication as evidence of the writer's homosexuality: "I think clear evidence of a strong homosexual interest at least in the last few years of her life, and her dedication of *The History of the Nun* reflects it." There are also certain correlations between the life of Mazarine and the episodes of Isabella's life (see the work of Laura Linker (2011: 60) to explore this parallel in greater depth).

¹⁹ For an exploration of the roles of the narrator, see the study carried out by Joanna Elizabeth Fowler (2010: 20-24) in which she examines "Behn's narrative choices."

²⁰ This point is also considered by Alison Shell (1996: 31) who concludes that "There is still very little that is definitely known about her life, and consequently, almost nothing about her religious affiliations before she started writing: she remarks in passing in the opening passages of *The History of the Nun; Or, The Fair Vow-Breaker* that she was 'design'd for a Nun' [...]" Maureen Duffy (1989: 100) also refers to this link. Paula R. Backscheider

The Behnian “royalist self-representation” is a means of reflecting “public authority on the basis of royalist principles” (Elk 2017: 1).

Isabella was executed for her behaviour and for her handling of events towards the end of her life. Therefore, her behaviour is the direct cause for her death, as in the case of the king. Both die on a cold morning, in front of a large group of spectators; and both, as has been said, deliver a speech before their execution. Similarly, both are sentenced and killed in the same way. As stated *a priori*, the verdict promulgated by the Court in finding the king guilty and thus sentencing him to death is the following: “That the King, for the crimes contained in the charge, should be carried back to the place from whence he came, and thence to the place of execution, where his head should be severed from his body” (Ludlow 1771: 121). Behn’s account of the life and times of Isabella ends as follows: “and the Executioner, at one Blow, sever’d her Beautiful Head from her Delicate Body” (Behn 1995: 258). The sentence pronounced by the Court and read by the clerk²¹ corroborates these similarities. There is the evident repetition of specific words such as “sever’d,” “head” and “body.”

In the story of the execution of Charles I, the figurehead of the body politic becomes a political instrument and a transgressor; and in the story of Isabella, a young woman experiences the same outcome and treatment as the king. It is important to note that the anti-establishment behaviour of Isabella is judged by the State itself, i.e. the *status quo* that governs the society is the very organisation in charge of prosecuting and bringing to justice the protagonist, who had destabilized the established social order through her actions. We must bear in mind that at this time, “life is understood to be a political affair” and that fiction in this period was considered to be “all politically conscious” (Doody 1997: 263).

The French knight who reveals the identity of the bearded visitor is exactly that - an informer - who in this order of politico-social analogies, fits into the many plots and intrigues in this time of crisis that was the *fin de siècle* period; one in 1678-1680 (the Popish Plot), followed by the Exclusion Crisis, and three years later the Protestant Plot (1685). In addition to the extremes the political crisis had reached by 1688 (when the author concluded work on this text), the birth in June of James Francis Edward Stuart and the questions over the legitimacy of

(2000: 13) points to the authorial strategy (followed by Barker and Manley) of inserting their voice and certain autobiographical elements into their own works, concluding “I see this characteristic as a deliberate strategy and an important, evolutionary step in the history of the English novel”.

²¹ This reference can be found in Edmond Ludlow (1771: 121) and James Harvey Robinson (1906: 317). Detailed accounts of Charles I’s trial and execution appear in the following studies: Cicely Veronica Wedgwood (1964: 191-223), Sean Kelsey (2011, 71-92) and Jackson J. Spielvogel (2012: 533).

James II's son arguably led to the author's compulsion to make evident and to openly express her political ideas.

As in the case of Charles I, her loyalty leads to her death. On the cold morning of January 30, 1649 when the king was being led to the scaffold to be beheaded, he wore “two heavy shirts so that he might not shiver,” The courageous Isabella “appear'd on the Scaffold all in Mourning” (Behn 1995: 257) reflecting her grief and at the same time showing her characteristic beauty and sensuality, her eloquence²² and youth: “but with a Meen so very Majestick and Charming, and a Face so surprizing Fair” (Behn 1995: 257). Just as the monarch refuses to renounce his ideology, his decisions or his past actions on his execution, Isabella goes to her death fully aware of having made her own decisions, of having searched her own happiness and survival in the heavily patriarchal society of seventeenth century England.

6. Conclusion

Isabella's actions are motivated by her desires; she takes an active role in the shaping of her designs both to good ends (happiness, implementation of her personal will) and to bad ones (social stigma, death and tragedy). Her efforts go against the social construct of femininity, shattering both the moral and the legal framework of society. Her behaviour subverts stereotypical gendered roles, leading her necessarily to experience “a gendered aesthetics of suffering” (Mathews 2012: 1). A woman's will is shown in precedence to these codes: her actions subvert the established order.

At the end of a century which has seen the publication of books of conduct²³ (Teague & Ezell 2016: 20-23) to advise and regulate female behaviour (such as, for example, *The Ladies Calling*), Behn publishes a book of female anti-behaviour, a story that presents an anomalous portrayal of woman (nomadic, courageous, rebellious) who, in order to achieve her own objectives, is capable of performing the most monstrous acts. From the point of view of the female fictional subject, the implementation of this female agency is not abnormal or monstrous, but motivated and redemptive. From a diachronic moral point of view, the

²² The protagonist has a remarkable capacity to control her emotions, which according to a study by Mathews (2012: 9) explains the deeds she has been able to commit. Jacqueline Pearson (2004: 193), in defining the text, mentions its “great psychological insight and moral complexity”.

²³ Paul Delany (1969: 159) examines a bunch of female writers and their autobiographies and books of conduct published during Behn's time. Coincidentally, the six writers he investigates were born between 1620 and 1625 (Mary Penington, Lady Fanshawe, Lady Halkett, Duchess of Newcastle, Mary Countess of Warwick and Lucy Hutchinson). Another chronological detail that unites them is the fact that they all wrote their works after 1660 (subsequent to the restoration of Charles II), with the exception of the Duchess of Newcastle.

conclusion to be drawn is that the woman who breaks away from the established order becomes a monster and therefore receives swift punishment, both at the hands of nature and society itself.

The murders she commits are attacks on the State itself and they do not go unpunished: she is tried and sentenced to death by the judicial court. Her behaviour, threatening the gendered cultural construct - and by extension the whole of society - is condemned by the State, and she is ultimately erased from society through execution.

Aphra Behn's pioneering defence of women with respect to the patriarchal power of the oppressive established society prevalent at the end of the 17th century cannot be denied. It may be further supported by reference to Thomas Southerne's adaptation in which the "oppressive power of patriarchy" (Pearson 1988: 150) appears diminished, while the protagonist is shown to be an "innocent" and sentimental victim, as well as the version written by Jane Barker, entitled "Philinda's STORY out of the BOOK"²⁴.

This secular tale, this "Little Trifle at your Feet" (Behn 1995: 208) - as Behn dedicates the story in the preliminary letter to the Duchess of Mazarine - embodies the weapons with which the first professional female poet of England makes her struggle against a society that relegates women either to domesticity or the convent. At the same time, the writer "employ[s] the very constraints that bind women to transform the stigma against their writing" (Nussbaum 2003: 61). Behn's weapon is her ingenuity and her writing: "according to their Capacities and Talents; mine, Madam, can only be exprest by my Pen" (Behn 1995: 208).

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²⁴ Barker's adaptation is included in her 1726 collection *The Lining of the Patch-work Screen; Design'd for the Farther Entertainment of the Ladies*, pp. 59-64.

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