

"HOW WRETCHED ARE OUR SEX": MAPPING GENDER IN APHRA BEHN'S "THE NUN"¹

"HOW WRETCHED ARE OUR SEX": MAPEANDO O GÊNERO NA OBRA DE APHRA BEHN "THE NUN"

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ABSTRACT: This paper begins by studying the confinement to which the protagonist is subjected, both in literal terms and in a more psychological sense. Secondly, it tackles the gender issues that are palpable throughout the work, both in the way the two sexes are presented in writing as well as in their interactions. Thirdly, it analyses Aphra Behn's defence of the female sex in *The Nun* as well as the gender equality that she evidently advocates. Ultimately, the recipient learns that the central character was only able to escape from her confinement by transgressing the social and familial rules in place, as can be seen in her attempt to free herself from the tyrannical rule of her father, and later in her sudden entry and subsequent fleeting departure from the convent. Despite being included in the title of the text, the convent has an ironic, even parodic function: the intention is to illustrate the reality of the situation for the majority of women in the author's day, as well as hinting at the social change which she so longs for.

Keywords: Aphra Behn; Female Writers ; The Nun; Gender; Prose Fiction.

RESUMO: Este artigo analisa, em primeiro lugar, o confinamento físico e mental a que é submetida a protagonista da história, tanto em termos literais quanto em um senso mais psicológico. Em segundo lugar, investiga questões de gênero que pulsam ao longo da obra, em sua representação através da escrita. Em terceiro lugar, analisa a defesa da mulher proposta por Aphra Behn em *The Nun* assim como a igualdade de gênero que prega. No entanto, infere-se que a personagem central somente é capaz de escapar de seu confinamento através da transgressão de regras sociais e familiares, como pode ser observado em sua tentativa de emancipar-se da autoridade tirânica paterna e, em seguida, em sua fugaz entrada e fuga do convento. A despeito do título da obra, o convento tem papel irônico e mesmo paródico, cuja principal função, proposta por Behn, é mostrar a realidade das mulheres de seu tempo, assim como sugerir as transformações sociais por ela almejadas.

Palavras-chave: Aphra Behn; Escritoras mulheres; *The Nun*; Gênero; Prosa ficcional.

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Introduction

Behn's legacy is original; her work does not remain within the parameters that define the prose typically written by women during the seventeenth century (DIETZ, 1988, p. 380-390). An excellent example of this is *The Nun: or, The Perjur'd Beauty* (1915). This text is a clear demonstration of how Behn distanced herself from the books of social conduct and treatises on behaviour published by other women. Female writers who dedicated themselves to the autobiographical genre with a focus on ethics include the Duchess of Newcastle, Mary Penington, Lady Fanshawe, Lady Halkett, Mary Countess of Warwick and Lucy Hutchinson (DELANY, 1969, p. 159), all of whom were born between 1620 and 1625. Behn also distances herself from authors who were closer to her in terms of time, such as Katherine Philips, who dealt with issues from a more conservative standpoint, with a greater measure of reserve and moderation. The issues dealt with change and the objectives and intentions of the authors also vary. Behn writes *de pane lucrando* and in search of posterity and fame (TODD, 1996, p. 233).

The writers known collectively as the 'fair triumvirate' are a clear precedent of the novelistic developments in English literature. The work of Aphra Behn, Delariviere Manley and Eliza Haywood are precursors to the novels of Fielding or Richardson, who "gentrified and masculinised" the narratives and plots of their predecessors. The writer known as Astrea made developments in poetry and theatre, dedicating the latter stages of her life to prose fiction, the genre championed by female writers of the time (REYNOLDS, 2006, p. 307).

Critics such as Richard Kroll (1994, p. 25) are cautious to use the term "novelist" with reference to Behn, likening her to Daniel Defoe and seeing her work within the context of the times in which she was writing. A working hypotheses used in previous articles is that the novel in England did not appear *ex nihilo*³. Rather, prior to 1740 there were monumental contributions from female writers such as Behn, who in the last decade of the 17th century gained considerable renown through published compilations of their work.

3 See the paper entitled "'Tis the honour of our sex": Indagación humana y literaria en *The Unfortunate Bride; or, The Blind Lady a Beauty* de Aphra Behn. **The Grove: Working Papers 20**, p. 175-199.



The Nun; or, The Perjur'd Beauty should not be confused with *The History of the Nun; or, the Fair Vow Breaker*, although both centre around the figure of the nun and set part of their action - however briefly - within the walls of a convent. In *The History of the Nun*, both Isabella and Katteriena display a symbolism that goes far beyond mere narrative embellishment. In *The Nun*, Arabella and Elvira present social criticism of great importance to the text.

In *Oroonoko*, the female narrator relates stories involving nuns, together with tales about the lives of the Romans and other men of renown. She defines herself as being a woman devoted to sewing and other such activities. Two decades later, the stories of nuns told in *Oroonoko* developed to become novels in their own right (GOREAU, 1980, p. 61).

The four nuns are demonstrative of Behn's knowledge and understanding of religious and monastic life. The four characters are the embodiment of a particular archetype, serving the author's purpose with regard to the question of confinement. They are also sufficiently defiant to rebel in other matters relating to gender that will unfold over the course of the narrative.

Ardelia's confinement : the woman's confinement

The protagonist is portrayed as being confined within her own house, under lock and key; estranged from worldly distractions at her father's behest. Don Antonio manages to get a letter to her in church (a familiar scene which appears in other stories⁴) and also approaches her whilst hiding his identity. As soon as he is recognised, the consequences are twofold; on the one hand he is attacked and on the other hand he is forced to hide his identity. Ardelia is locked in a room overlooking the garden, with iron bars over the windows. She is accompanied at all times, even on her monthly visit to the church. Don Henrique refers to the lady as a "beautiful prisoner", emphasizing the severity of her "circumstances" (BEHN, 1915, p. 329).

The subjugation of women is illustrated in other ways. When don Henrique expresses his desire to marry Ardelia he is invited to dinner by her father, who wishes to show his appreciation. However, in this scene the

⁴ One example is *The Lucky Mistake*, where Rinaldo considers the possibility of meeting Atlante in the church (Behn, 1915, p. 359).



protagonist remains on the sidelines, without participating in the decision-making process at all (BEHN, 1915, p. 330). Dona Ardelia's reaction speaks volumes: she does not appear at the meal, giving the explanation that she is "indispos'd". This idea is thematically consistent with the narrative in view of the approach that has been outlined thus far. The narrator presents this idea as follows: "when dona Ardelia was to be present; who, at that time, was said to be indispos'd, (as 'tis very probable she was, with so close an imprisonment)" (BEHN, 1915, p. 330). At this point in the text it is specifically revealed that dona Ardelia sees the situation as a form of imprisonment.

Another favour which don Antonio asks of his friend don Henrique is that he should deliver a letter detailing the various steps to be taken by the daughter in order to free herself from the fetters of her home life and by this means achieve the happiness of both (that is, don Henrique and dona Ardelia). The protagonist's response comes in the same epistolary form, also delivered by the hand of don Henrique. At this point, don Henrique is a friend of don Antonio's and willing to help him and act as his intermediary. The noun phrase employed by Ardelia ("my enlargement", BEHN, 1915, p. 331) is notable as a depiction and definition of the situation in which she finds herself at present.

The protagonist has a conversation with don Henrique in the garden, reflecting a social custom that was establishing itself during this period. However, the scene does not show an independent woman conversing with an equal, outside of the domestic environment dominated by her father. The young woman uses the term "destiny" in order to question her fate. In response, don Henrique states that it is as solid as the "laws of nature" (BEHN, 1915, p. 333), introducing the concept of determination, another idea that was often central to the literature of the time. Immediately afterwards, Ardelia makes a reference to their friendship in order to correspond with the wishes of her father, seeing her obedience as a form of filial obligation. Dona Ardelia does not want to risk upsetting her father; she considers the inevitable disloyalty of don Henrique towards don Antonio as of secondary importance. In fact, Ardelia tells him that she would prefer to return to her "miserable confinement" (BEHN, 1915, p. 334) so as to maintain peace and order and ensure Henrique's peace of mind.



Shortly afterwards, when don Antonio embraces Ardelia, the concept of confinement reappears following Ardelia's actions upon shunning Antonio's advancement: "But as soon as she had freed herself from the loving circle that should have been the dear and lov'd confinement or centre of a faithful heart, she began to dart whole showers of tortures on him from her eyes" (BEHN, 1915, p. 337). The noun "confinement" appears once again in the text, amounting to a recurrent theme that will be of vital importance throughout the narrative. From domestic confinement, she moves to another form of captivity, representing two customs of that time.

From her home she moves directly to the convent, where she is also captive to some extent. This seclusion is physical as well as psychological, depicted on a more purely human level. The young woman is incapable of making a decision. She seems to simply bow her head and obey the will of her male enforcers. Despite the fact that she acquiesces to being taken to the monastery over the course of "a few hours", once there she gives voice to her distress: "it was not long before her grief renewing with greater violence, and more afflicting circumstances, had obliged them to stay with her till it was almost dark" (BEHN, 1915, p. 340). Both don Henrique and don Antonio offer to stay with her a while, in order to comfort her in her time of suffering.

This imprisonment, by contrast, is presented as being voluntary, since the omniscient narrator tells us that she repents, frequently longing to see don Henrique and to speak with him: "by whose help she promised to her self a deliverance out of her voluntary imprisonment" (BEHN, 1915, p. 343). In this case, the writer is careful to make it clear that although it is the domestic circumstances of the young woman that have led her to don the habit and enter into monastic life as the lesser of two evils, this is still in some way a voluntary decision made of her own free will. At the very least, it is a decision reached without the outside influence of others, as is the case elsewhere, such as in the story of Isabella de Vallary, the nun whose father was determined to send her to his sister the abbess, or sister Katteriena, whose father confined her to the convent rather than have her marry a servant, thereby protecting the purity of his lineage (BEHN, 1994, p. 151).

Don Henrique has the appearance of a ghost, wandering around the convent gates within which dona Ardelia is confined. In this disguise, the enamoured young man talks to a servant-girl, who explains to him the nun's



longing to free herself and escape the convent. Accordingly, her “strong desire of liberty” is tangible (BEHN, 1915, p. 344). The writer wants to stress the nun's desire to put an end to the situation in which she finds herself: to shrug off the yoke of captivity, which in itself is a fitting synecdoche for the situation of womankind in general at that time. In fact, the longed-for moment of emancipation occurs the following night “on the fourteenth day, at exactly twelve”. This very specific detail accentuates the verisimilitude of the account, as well as adding to the credibility of the situation being described. In so doing, it also increases the value of the liberation sought for - and achieved - by this young woman.

It is notable how, once freed from her domestic “imprisonment”, the woman still encounters further difficulties and setbacks before she is able to satisfy her desire for love and to reach a point at which she feels both secure and happy. First, she struggles with the conflict between the dictates of her heart and the need to stay with don Antonio, specifically to honour the paradoxical wishes of don Henrique whose concerns are a question of honour and a desire to protect his friendship with don Antonio.

A second obstacle comes in the form of her separation from society, purely to allow the two men to discuss recent events and reach a suitable conclusion without her interfering, or even being present. So, having just escaped her domestic seclusion, aided by don Henrique (who seems to have deceived the protagonist's father in helping her), she immediately finds herself trapped once again, entangled in a love affair that causes further pain and suffering and ultimately leads her, *ipso facto*, to the convent, a powerful symbol of reclusion and isolation in the social context of that time.

One detail in particular cannot be overlooked by any study of this work. The protagonist's sudden ingress into the convent, briefly mentioned earlier, is of crucial importance. The decision to don the sacred habits is such a pivotal concept within the work that it is even included in the title. However, the manner by which she enters into the convent and her swift departure from it force us to consider it as a ironical depiction, a parody of seclusion within the convent by a young woman who, far from professing an intrinsic vocation for a life of religious devotion, is motivated to enter into the life of a nun as a result of her social situation. The brevity with which the writer depicts these occurrences is clear proof of her ironic



intentions, of her parodying and critique of this tradition, and by extension, of her defence of womankind.

Linked to this idea, it is glaring the story of Elvira (the other nun) portrayed in the novel. Elvira, in the final section, joined the convent after having been rejected by don Henrique. In the text, the occurrences are succinctly described as follows: "ever since Don Henrique had forsaken her" (BEHN, 1915, p. 344). On this occasion, seclusion within a convent arises as a viable alternative, as a solution to certain problems or as a secondary option once the initial, more favourable option has failed. Behn intends for the fate of Elvira to stand as a representative example for the condition of the entire female sex.

The author's particular depiction of the convent and of Elvira is further accentuated by the fact that the nun's departure from monastic life is related in less than a dozen words. It is achieved through a subordinate consecutive clause, the content of which would be entirely unknown to the reader of this *novella*, aware that the narrative was drawing to a close and that don Sebastian's sister entered into the nunnery for certain reasons and is now leaving.

It is not unreasonable to assume that the author is depicting a genuine custom of her time and in so doing, by extension she is reflecting the life choices with which many women were confronted. Dona Ardelia first enters into monastic life for certain reasons, Elvira for others. Both abandon the convent in the end. The other motivating factors are manifestly financial in essence. It is important to note that the two women in the story end up in a convent, and both of them eventually leave. The writer is demonstrating, *pars pro toto*, the paths being taken and the means by which they later free themselves. Behn's literary output offers an illustration not only of confinement and reclusion, but also the physical image of the wall separating the female sex from the external world: this barrier is something which dona Ardelia is forced to scale in order to pass from the internal to the external world.

Don Henrique arrives and offers her some ropes with which to climb over the wall separating the convent from the outside world. She scales the wall: on the other side there are more ropes that help bring her safely into the arms of don Henrique. This is a significant detail in the context of the entire work, symbolizing the bonds by which the woman has



been restrained as well as being the ultimate means by which she successfully achieves liberation. The ropes are simultaneously symbolic of restriction and the process of passing from confinement to the freedom of the outside world.

When the protagonist decides to take control and exercise her own free will, she must inevitably transgress the limits established by the status quo. It follows, therefore, that only by challenging and transgressing against the established order is the young woman able to fulfil her desires. The relevance of this goes beyond the limits of the monastery: it relates to all the social conditions that inhibited and relegated women from public life in seventeenth century England.

Lastly, the nun must be seen as a metaphor for reclusion and confinement within the limits of a specific place, removed from society within the priory walls. When the two men want to confront each other face to face, they order the protagonist to go to the convent. In this way, the image of the nun signifies familial and societal control on the decision-making capacity of women and more specifically, on female sexuality (PEARSON, 1988, p. 160). On another semantic level, the nun represents the breaking of sacred vows, which by extension indicates the rebelliousness of a woman who is determined to decide for herself in the midst of a society that tends to marginalize and restrain her. Then, Ardelia's refusal to be tied for one lover and her promiscuity may well be seen as signs of breaking with conventions. This woman is a direct challenge to the female stereotypes that were so deeply entrenched in the collective conscious of the time. Clearly, Behn considered it to be more vital - and equally admirable - for a woman to go in search of freedom than to honour and keep her religious vows *per secula seculorum*.

It is interesting to note that this also occurs in the third part of *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*, when Calista joins the Augustine monastery in Brussels where her aunt is the abbess. A similar parallel can be found in *The History of the Nun*; the very fact that the subject has been repeated in several narratives suggests that the choice of subject matter is by no means accidental. In this case, upon being brought to the monastery gates dona Ardelia "was kindly and respectfully received by the Lady Abbess" (340). According to Maureen Duffy the inspiration for this plot comes from the collected letters of the Aston family, known as the *Tixall*



Letters (CLIFFORD, 1915, p. 60). Among other details (DUFFY, 1977, p. 266), it is possible to draw the conclusion that Behn composed *The Nun* during the year of great creative productivity in which she also produced the climactic third part of the *Love Letters*.

"These are more than riddles, madam": further gender issues

Elvira is presented as the sister of Don Sebastian, rather than by her real name. This act of referring to her in terms of her male relatives is in itself an indication of the inferior position held by women in society. Also, her entry into the convent comes as a result of her father's disapproval of a potential marriage agreement, and so that she might not be present while the men have their discussions. This detail illustrates a custom of the time whereby marriages were arranged and agreed upon by the *pater familias*, while also emphasising the impression of a patriarchal society where women are second-class citizens of little or no influence.

Moreover, the writer points out that on several occasions don Antonio tries to take the young woman away, although these attempts are admittedly unsuccessful. The sense of female subjugation is further stressed when it is revealed how the young woman is confined to a room overlooking the garden, with iron railings on the windows. The image is a vivid portrayal of the state of women in general at that time, while also illustrating the specific confinement suffered by the protagonist as a result of having gone against the wishes of her family. This is supported by don Antonio's comment to don Henrique as they make their way to the south of Spain, "lamenting the severity of her present circumstances, that admitted of no prospect of relief" (BEHN, 1915, p. 329-330). The stepmother who accompanies her to the church is described using a comparative of inferiority, clearly intended to show her in a negative light: "mother-in-law, worse than a Duegna" (BEHN, 1915, p. 329).

Significantly, when Ardelia goes to church, she is accompanied by both her father and the "duegna", this being referred to by the narrator as her "miserable confinement" (BEHN, 1915, p. 329). The protagonist's father is the one to propose marriage for his daughter, further emphasising the degree of control and manipulation enjoyed by the father figure over the young women in their charge (BEHN, 1915, p. 330). A contrast is presented here between "the economic and social" materialism and the "purely



psychological” factors (MILLER, 1996, p. 17). Also, the disparity is highlighted between the patriarchal system and the status of the female character.

The range of emotions embodied by the character of dona Ardelia is a topic that merits discussion in its own chapter. Generally speaking, in the novels of Aphra Behn male desire and male will are presented as being mutable, fickle and liable to change without warning, while female desire is shown as being in some respects more durable and sincere. Essentially, the female is more reliable than the male. The exemplary nature and tenacity of the female sex in comparison to the male is emphasised in the proclamation at the beginning *The History of the Nun*, where Behn gives a concise and artful summation of her vision: “For, without all dispute, women are by nature more constant and just than men” (BEHN, 1994, p. 139-140).

In *The Nun*, the mutability of female emotions and the dynamism which the writer gives the female psyche is a macro-topic that pervades the work from start to finish, such as when dona Ardelia fixes don Henrique once again with her loving gaze. At this point Behn remarks in parentheses: “No wonder that she who could resolve to forsake her God for man, should quit one lover for another” (BEHN, 1915, p. 345).

Behn foretells how just as dona Ardelia abandoned God for a man, so will she show herself capable of forswearing this man in favour of another. The nobility of the poet's intentions, in looking to establish a better place for women, is undeniable; with great naturalness she expresses that the protagonist's only wish is to find love and to be happy. Behn stresses the importance which female desire holds for her, having been silenced and effectively neutralized in part of the literature of the time. There was a distinct need for a literary voice such as that expressed by this writer, who declared without ambiguity: “She had her wish, and more, if possible” (BEHN, 1915, p. 345).

And yet, the destiny awaiting the protagonist could not be worse. The same thing is true with respect to the male characters. The work develops towards “literal death” (BARASH, 1999, p. 111). The semantic structure presents this shocking climax as a direct consequence of all the scheming, confusion and sentimental vacillations. In the same way that the author encountered difficulties and setbacks as a result of having transgressed the ideals of “womanhood”, the protagonist pays a high price for having debased feminine virtue and violating her moral purity.



With this in mind, it seems fair to argue that the narrative contains valid and articulately expressed cultural issues. On the one hand, the concept of confinement is a central aspect, the result of which is the attainment of certain goals by means of force and a lack of empathy. On the other hand, it is worth pointing out the developments and changes in a woman's sentiments which, rejected by society, eventually lead to the death of the principal characters.

At one point in the story, don Henrique explains his resentment to dona Ardelia at having to hand her over against her father's wishes. This comment reveals the twofold manipulation of women at the time; on the one hand, there is the influence of the father figure, and on the other hand that which don Henrique seems to exercise over dona Ardelia. Ultimately, don Henrique is unwilling to go against her father's wishes. He describes this possible step as being "an unpardonable crime" (BEHN, 1915, p. 333). The protagonist's response to this is indicative of the resignation and impassivity often shown by female characters in confronting the immutability of their own fate:

- And must this be done? (she ask'd.) Is it inevitable as Fate?
- Fix'd as the Laws of Nature, madam, (reply'd he) don't you find the necessity of it, Ardelia? (continued he, by way of question:) Does not your love require it? Think, you are going to your dear Antonio, who alone can merit you, and whom only you can love.
- Were your last words true (returned she) I should yet be unhappy in the displeasure of a dear and tender father, and infinitely more, in being the cause of your infidelity to him (Behn, 1915, p. 333-334).

Ultimately, the heroine would sooner resign herself to her own imprisonment than disturb the peace and upset don Henrique: "I could with greater satisfaction return to my miserable confinement" (BEHN, 1915, p. 334). Although dona Ardelia is not in control of her own destiny at this point, she continues to concern herself for its progress and destiny. On certain occasions, she favours the suffering of her confinement over being the object of manipulation at the hands of others.

The encounter between don Antonio and dona Ardelia is a crucial moment in terms of the concept of domination, as well as the decision which the heroine makes with regard to her suitor. It is she who cries out in



surprise when don Antonio embraces and kisses her. It is she who dominates the discursive scene while the lover slips away, stunned.

The reader is left in no doubt as to the change in the woman's sentiments when, in response to a question from don Henrique, the protagonist states that she did in fact love don Antonio, but that she would rather make her father happy by staying true to the love that she now feels for don Henrique (BEHN, 1915, p. 335-336). The young woman's seriousness and prudence becomes evident as she is the one to convince the man in question to continue in his courtship, assuring the happiness of them both by so doing. Further evidence of this change in opinion is that in the encounter between don Antonio and dona Ardelia she rails against him, employing derogatory terms against the man with whom only pages earlier she had been so deeply in love.

While during their encounter Ardelia rejects him *a priori*, she goes on to say "Yet, Antonio, I must not have my wish; I must continue with you, not out of choice, but by command, by the strictest and severest obligation that ever bound humanity" (BEHN, 1915, p. 337). This change in the woman's views, signifying a shift in her thought process and in her decisions, serves as a support for the female gender, allowing for the development of individual courage, determination and arbitration. Ardelia immediately justifies her response by declaring it to have been an order from don Henrique, simultaneously allowing her to appear submissive to the directions of the male figure. In this instance, she refers to don Henrique with the superlative phrase, "the dearest object of my soul" (BEHN, 1915, p. 337).

When don Antonio asks dona Ardelia to explain her change in sentiments - which he had not anticipated in the slightest - he uses two imperatives and defines her intervention and thought process as being the "light of your discourse", which to him are representative of "darkness". The privileged position held by the woman with respect to the man is palpable in this scene, as is the positive characterisation of her speech (via the noun "light") in comparison to the "darkness" perceived by don Antonio. The author wishes to make it perfectly clear that the protagonist has had a change of heart, causing a certain amount of disruption for the man who has fallen for her and who is listening to her speak. To demonstrate this abrupt change, she has Antonio say these words.



Don Henrique leaves, ceding Ardelia to don Antonio. Later, he makes a return. When dona Ardelia comes round, she floods the scene with affectionate words for don Henrique. The author uses this moment to include a flash of insight into her defence of sexual equality, describing the protagonist's outburst as being “with all the route expressions that the soul of a lover, and a woman's too, is capable of uttering” (BEHN, 1915, p. 340). Behn stresses that the soul of a woman is equally capable of giving voice to their feelings. With this phrase, Behn externalizes female privacy, which had traditionally been confined to the domestic or familial spheres; she reveals the interior world of a woman, amounting to a direct challenge to the literary and social conventions of the time.

Of great importance is don Richardo's reaction upon taking in the wounded don Henrique. Rather than enquiring as to his daughter's whereabouts or her condition, he concerns himself with other matters: “Before he thought it convenient to ask him any question more than to enquire of his daughter's safety, to which he receiv'd a short but satisfactory answer” (BEHN, 1915, p. 342). Behn's gives a harsh and cutting critique of this father figure. Don Richardo, far from being concerned with his daughter's safety, has other questions which must first be answered satisfactorily. His concern is not for his daughter, but for other matters of a more selfish and supercilious nature. Only after this exchange does he send for a capable surgeon to tend to don Henrique.

The arrival of the doctor, a detail that also appears in other texts (BEHN, 1915, p. 488), indicates the father's elevated social status by the fact that he has servants on hand who rush to call in the medical expert. At the same time, this detail points to the presence of these men of science, following William Harvey's treatise on the circulation of the blood half a century earlier in *Exercitatio Anatomica de Motu Cordis et Sanguinis in Animalibus* (1628). It also points to the emergence of the *Royal Society* and the empirical zeal of many men who supported the new scientific approach, following the work of men such as Newton, Locke and Hobbes. This is an “épistèmè” or “categoric de pensée” (FOUCAULT, 1966, p. 45) which is clearly notable throughout the text.

The narrative voice, formulated as an alter-ego of Behn's, occasionally summarises the difficulties and dalliances of the female protagonist. An example of this is the reference to “the justice of heaven, in



their disappointment” (BEHN, 1915, p. 344), with which the narrator seems to seek amends for the atrocities suffered by the female sex, without losing focus on what is arguably the central aspect of her stories - the fate of her characters (GOREAU, 1980, p. 279).

In the final section of the story, Elvira sends a letter to don Henrique in which she warns him of the threat against his life at the hands of don Sebastian (who, as it is known, is Elvira's brother). The letter reveals a degree of suspicion on Elvira's part, who years earlier had fallen in love with the young man. The protagonist consciously plays a game between her desire and his life, the letter culminating with the significant noun phrase which has been repeated throughout: “I know, Henrique, your Ardelia is dearer to you than your life: But your life, your dear life, is more desired than any thing in this world, by [...] Your injur'd and forsaken” (BEHN, 1915, p. 346).

Ardelia's courage and her changes in attitude are in keeping with the aforementioned idea regarding the mutability of female sentiments and impulses in this text. At this point, don Henrique chooses to substitute his visits in person for letters. The narrator uses the noun “treachery” (BEHN, 1915, p. 346) to describe the nun, who continues to promise Henrique the happiness he desires. On the one hand, the difficult circumstances of her arrival at the convent can be deduced, on the other her hypocritical treatment of don Henrique, since no sooner had she helped don Sebastian than she concealed her intentions from the injured man. Don Henrique is even present at her escape.

When don Sebastian stabs Ardelia, missing don Henrique who was his intended target, she cries out: “Ah, wretched Maid!” (BEHN, 1915, p.347), forcefully and succinctly focusing the attention on the young woman's misfortune. The protagonist is the first to be pierced by the sword and yet, she is the last to die. The author wants to make her protagonist - the central woman in the narrative - a witness to everything that occurs, even during the most tragic scenes in which the macabre aspects are accentuated. To this end she states that: “He [Don Henrique] could not out-live that last word; which was echo'd by Elvira, who all this while stood weeping, and calling out for help, as she stood close to the wall in the garden” (BEHN, 1915, p. 348).



The epithet applied to the protagonist by the narrator at this final stage is "the late fallen Angel Ardelia" (BEHN, 1915, p. 348), indicating not only her liberation from the evil actions occasioned in life, but also the writer's sympathy and empathy with regard to her female protagonist.

Towards equality

An early suggestion of equality comes with the presentation of the quarrelling families of don Antonio and dona Ardelia, at the suggestion that both characters come from a noble family and that both families are in possession of an enormous fortune. The technique employed by Behn cannot be overlooked; she uses a comparative of equality, which supports the idea of a possible romantic relationship. The author takes the opportunity to broach the subject of equality between this man and woman, both in terms of their respective fortunes and with regard to their beautiful appearance (CURTIN, 2011, p. 75): "[...] their families had been at enmity for several years; tho' Antonio was as well descended as she, and had as ample a fortune; nor was his person, according to his sex, any way inferior to her's; and certainly, the beauties of his mind were more excellent, especially if it be an excellence to be constant" (BEHN, 1915, p. 329).

Ardelia is aware of what is going on and, in spite of everything, she manages to devise the plans that the men must follow in order to liberate her. She gives don Antonio a note in which she clarifies the steps required in order to "snatch her away" (BEHN, 1915, p. 329) from her father. It is a protest against paternal control, from the daughter suffering the confinement imposed on her by her father. The father's dominance and his designs for his daughter's future have impeded the development of her own principles, her independent thoughts and the free will that she is in the process of developing. It is a clear critique of patriarchal society. At the same time, the note which the protagonist succeeds in giving to don Antonio is the written embodiment of female willpower, demonstrating how Ardelia is capable of coordinating and carrying out specific actions.

The protagonist delights at having her love requited, with two impassioned gentlemen prostrate before her. Initially these are don Antonio and don Henrique; later it is don Henrique and don Sebastian. Clearly, this disparity is the catalyst for much of the drama inherent in the plot. Alongside this, it is noticeable the carnivalisation of identities such as when



don Sebastian aims to stab don Henrique with his sword and mistakenly wounds Ardelia instead; a technique that was typical in the Restoration theatre.

Throughout the text, there is a notable desire for sexual equality. This is evident in the adverb employed in the phrase: "In short, she then only wished that he might love her equally". Behn also talks of equality in the context of love, with one individual giving themselves to another.

In the conversation that takes place in the garden, the narrator clarifies that dona Ardelia "made use of the privilege of her sex" (BEHN, 1915, p. 333) and in fact, it is her oratory skills and her strong desire to uncover the truth that lead her to ask don Henrique the reason for his unhappiness. Dona Ardelia does not have many occasions to take part in a meeting between equals, nor is she endowed with sufficient freedom to relax and enjoy the typical conversations of women. Now, however, when she is afforded the opportunity, she sustains a prolonged dialogue with don Henrique in the garden. It is worth remembering how, in order to free herself from the confines of her domestic environment, Arabella, the protagonist of Behn's *The Wandering Beauty* (BEHN, 1915, p. 446), deceives her father by telling him that she is going to the house of a friend to discuss socially acceptable topics, such as marriage, sewing, clothing and food.

Behn's portrayal of the female sex as confident and serious becomes evident in dona Ardelia's declaration of love to don Henrique, particularly through the comparison employed: "I did, she reply'd; and that I do love you, is as true as that I told you so" (BEHN, 1915, p. 335). The straightforward syntax using the linking verb "is" and the coordinate clause, further emphasised by the use of the auxiliary, clearly demonstrate Ardelia's assuredness. She stands as a synecdoche of the confidence and the capacity for decision-making which Behn wishes to see amplified to include all women of her day.

When dona Ardelia plots to escape the convent, she initially agrees on making her escape with don Henrique on the fourteenth day at midnight; later she makes the same agreement with don Sebastian, on the same night but an hour earlier. She shows herself to be a virtuous woman, totally in control of her own destiny. She is the one who formulates the plan outlining how, when and with whom she is to escape. In this way Ardelia makes the decision as to whom she will marry. Elvira also leaves the



convent, finding the right moment to write to don Henrique in the hope of preventing his death at the hands of her brother don Sebastian. The author presents us with two women who, through hell and high water, are determined to take control of their own lives.

There is a notable amount of criticism on the part of the author, in that the characters entering into convent life do so suddenly and for negative reasons. Neither seems to show a sense of religious calling or profound conviction. Moreover, the young nuns suddenly hang up their habits and return to the outside world, to society and to the problems of daily life. The fact that this all occurs in such a fleeting and sudden manner is in itself an implicit condemnation.

Examining the semantics of the text as a whole, we can see Ardelia as the embodiment of a *modus operandi* of self-defence and rebellion, in terms of the composition of her character as a woman. This is a “celebration of agency” (MILLER, 1996, p. 17). Ardelia's feelings and thought processes appear totally dynamic, fluctuating and ever-changing; she refuses to devote herself solely to one suitor, in a demonstration of how “the incapacity to give oneself entirely to another, or even to love in more than a passion fashion, is not limited to men” (GOUREAU, 1980, p. 286). The image of the woman, appearing partly as a victim of confinement and reclusion, outlines the concept of reversing the sexual balance of power (BLAIN, 1990, p. 78).

This characterisation, so definitive of the male characters, is taken up by the female protagonist of *The Nun*, whose behaviour clearly reflects this trait. The presentation of Antonio upon arriving in Seville, is one of an honourable man whose virtue far outshines that of Ardelia. Later on, don Antonio is described using a double comparison “who was as real in his friendship, as constant in his love” (BEHN, 1915, p. 332), which has the effect of highlighting the sincerity and constancy of this character. With this in mind, it is interesting to note how, as a rule of thumb, Behn relates innate goodness to the feminine sphere, while moral corruption tends to come from the male side and from society itself.

There is a notable “public display of femininity” (CHICO, 2005, p. 127) in the courage and determination of the protagonist, who monopolizes the scene and fights, *vox clamans in deserto*, against the *status quo* and against the position of women in eighteenth-century England and, by



extension, all of contemporary Europe. Arabella does not share some of the typical traits of female characters from the fiction writing of the time, as in the case of the descriptions given by Oldham (“A Satyr Upon a Woman”, p. 6-7). Instead, the receiver of the text is presented with an original creation, a female protagonist whose qualities reveal a transgression of the social mores and customs of the time. Nevertheless, it must be inferred that lustful women are the objects of ridicule and punishment. A woman that overcomes the difficulties found in society represents a threat for the patriarchal system and, as a consequence, ends in a tragic mode.

The protagonist's changing affections for don Antonio, and later for don Henrique, are a crucial aspect of the narrative, as has already been examined. However, there is one further scene that is worth mentioning. If, initially, it was the two male protagonists who were fighting over the young lady and whose dispute generated the tension and disruption in the plot, ultimately it is the woman herself who sets her sights on the two men (don Henrique and don Sebastian) and who carries out the steps that she wishes to take; premeditating, deciding, and ultimately putting her own plans into action.

Conclusions

Aphra Behn goes beyond the fictionalisation of the *res gestae* and certain specific events, with the intention of defending the female sex, as personified in the text by the character of Ardelia. The literary focus is on a subversive young woman whose story is modelled in prose fiction, given its potential for commercial success (GRONSTEDT, 2011, p. 24). There are various conclusions to be drawn from this text.

One initial deduction is how the protagonist delights in having her love requited, with two enamoured noblemen at her feet. Initially, these two men are don Antonio and don Henrique; later it is don Henrique and don Sebastian who compete for her affections. Clearly, this disparity is the catalyst for much of the drama inherent in the plot of the text. Alongside this, it is inferred the carnivalisation of identities such as when don Sebastian aims to stab don Henrique with his sword and mistakenly wounds Ardelia instead. Moreover, when Ardelia decides to escape the convent she initially makes a plan with don Henrique to leave on the fourteenth day at



exactly midnight. Later, she makes the same agreement with don Sebastian, on the same day but an hour earlier.

The second conclusion to be drawn is how the female characters are presented as being virtuous and in control of their own destiny. This is evident in how Ardelia makes the decision as to whom she will marry. It is also noticeable in how Elvira, the other nun in the novel, escapes the convent, finding the right moment in which to write to don Henrique in an attempt to avoid his death at the hands of her brother don Sebastian. Having said this, it is important to acknowledge the heroine's shifts in affections. These are clearly part of a well-thought out scheme on the part of the author. Behn stresses the crushing subjugation of the female sex, depicting acts of direct rebellion and innate rebelliousness against society as a whole, as well as the specific conditions which comprise this social reality.

Thirdly, it is worth mentioning two central symbols in Behn's writing; namely, the setting of the monastery and the figure of the nun. The convent symbolises confinement and separation from the world. In order to escape, the heroine must scale the high wall (yet another symbol) which separates her physically from the external world. The nun is the archetypal woman, at odds with society and forced to enter the monastery, be it for matters of love (as in the case of Elvira) or for issues of authority and in order to remove herself from the focus of action. This is the case for dona Ardelia, who is sent to the convent so that, meanwhile, the men in her life might be able to speak, argue and make the necessary decisions in her absence. Furthermore, the domestic environment in which dona Ardelia is detained also amounts to a form of reclusion for her. The scenes with which Behn's writing confronts us are masterfully portrayed and full of meaning.

Lastly, it is worth pointing out that there is a degree of criticism on the part of the author in her representation of characters who enter into monastic life suddenly and for the wrong reasons; they are almost entirely lacking in religious calling or heartfelt conviction. They choose to take the holy orders in order to free themselves of certain personal problems and because, in many cases, they are manipulated or coerced by a profoundly androcentric and patriarchal society. And yet, in the quiet of the monastery their problems continue. The characters continue to be pursued by the dilemmas and doubts lurking within the human psyche. The external problems that they had attempted to avoid even catch up with them within



the walls of the convent. When they decide to renounce their faith and leave, the same difficulties remain. Those who chose to be nuns with little consideration hang up their habits and return to the outside world, to society and to the problems of daily life.

When dona Ardelia frees herself of the restrictions of domestic life and paternal control, after experiencing religious life within the convent, she returns with a unique perspective and set of experiences, which she has built up over the course of her life. Upon returning, she is freer: more in control of her present situation, more in control of her future and more conscious of her past. The fact that this all occurs in such a fleeting and sudden manner is in itself an implicit condemnation.

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