Between

At the Edge of Existence. Transgressive Spatialities that Subvert Expectations and Orders in Aphra Behn's *The Fair Jilt* and *The History of the Nun*

Carla Tempestoso

Abstract

Throughout history, the figure of the nun has exerted an incredible fascination on writers, much like the mysterious and inaccessible places where they resided – specifically nunneries. However, the dichotomous nature of convents and monasteries – confinement and freedom – is a fundamental element through which these spaces could be reimagined. Indeed, these institutions are of great scholarly importance because they stand at the intersection of different social and cultural spheres and serve as a reflection of perspectives on gender, religion, and politics. This is perfectly illustrated in Aphra Behn's *The Fair Jilt* (1688) and *The History of the Nun* (1689). In her novellas, Behn compares the experiences of women living in enclosed spaces to highlight the contradictory liminal spaces where legitimate socio-cultural forms are reshaped.

Keywords

Aphra Behn, Eighteenth-Century studies, Transgressive public spaces, Nunhood, Unconventional femininity.

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At the Edge of Existence. Transgressive Spatialities that Subvert Expectations and Orders in Aphra Behn's *The Fair Jilt* and *The History of the Nun*

Carla Tempestoso

In these deep solitudes and awful cells,
Where heav'nly-pensive, contemplation dwells,
And ever-musing melancholy reigns;
What means this tumult in a Vestal's veins?
-Alexander Pope, "*Eloisa to Abelard*" (1-4)

1. Seeing in the Context: Which Nuns?

An article in *The Guardian* entitled "Can't kick the habit: why do so many writers create fictional nuns?" by Moira Redmond describes how many authors have explored the rich plot and character possibilities thrown up by the physical, moral, and cultural confinement of the convent. By wondering why women became nuns, Redmond emphasises the importance of convents not as communities with secrets and troublesome elections but as «an opportunity to have good, strong female characters without their being framed by their relationships with men» (Redmond 2014). This unconventional gender role is evident in Aphra Behn's *The Fair Jilt* (1688) and *The History of the Nun* (1689), and by considering other fictional nuns and the strangely fascinating world of monasteries and convents, this essay aims to explore the two novellas and their subversive nun-like characters who reveal the limitations and ineffectiveness of established social structures.

On the one hand, nuns – secluded from societal norms – epitomise the ideals of virtuous and unattainable female purity. On the other hand,

a conspicuous dichotomy emerges from prevalent contrasting stereotypes in the portrayal of nuns, juxtaposing them as individuals embodying both chastity and sexual promiscuity (Evangelisti 2008). Yet, according to Horacio Sierra, one major factor in the interest of nunhood is their status as a paradox in a patriarchal world because nuns are at once «chaste women devoted to God […] and females who reject courtship, sex, marriage, childbearing, and materialism, they are anathema to how society has proscribed roles for women: sex object, wife, mother, and capitalist consumer» (Sierra 2016: 1). R. Howard Bloch (1991) presents another analogous association that emphasises the nun's eroticised chastity as a manifestation «of the elevated fair one of the courtly love tradition, of the woman practicing the "house monasticism" of domestic continence and of the cloistered woman abstracted from the world» (Bloch 1991: 93). Therefore, there can be no literary analysis of the figure of the nun without an accompanying analysis of the places where they were enclosed, because the images of both nuns and nunneries have always intrigued and inspired the creation of fictional spaces of transgression and resistance.

In this respect, Robert Tally explains that «space and place are understood through imaginary or figurative means […], and to the extent that literature is a fundamentally imaginative "science", then literature becomes a privileged medium through which we can perceive, understand, and explore spaces and places, while also perhaps projecting alternative spaces» (Darici 2015: 29). This notion is particularly relevant when considering the representation of nuns in early modern European literature, where the convent becomes both a literal and imaginative space that transcends geographical borders and narrow interpretations. The literary depiction of nuns as complex, multifaceted figures extends beyond English borders, reflecting broader European trends in the early modern period. Silvia Evangelista, in *Nuns: A History of Convent Life, 1400-1700*, explores the European convent as a unique social and cultural space where women navigated religious, political, and personal challenges. Evangelista argues that convents, though sites of devotion, were dynamic spaces where nuns exerted influence, defied patriarchal norms, and created intellectual and literary works that contributed to the larger cultural fabric of Europe. According to Evangelista far from being passive and secluded, many nuns were «travellers and founders of new religious houses in Europe» (Evangelista 2008: 81) and they also «made music, and invested money in the maintenance of organs, in bringing in outside organists to play, and to buy musical instruments, as in the case of the nuns of Santa Isabel in Toledo» (*ibid.* 117). Moreover, French nuns became active in «hospitals, orphanag-

es, and in the wider community, where they offered a variety of caring services. They became an integral part of modern France» (*ibid.* 117). In line with this participation in the intellectual and political life of their communities, Claire Walker in *Gender and Politics in Early Modern Europe: English Convents in France and the Low Countries* focuses on the English nuns throughout the entirety of their period in exile (1590-1800). Her study emphasizes the English convents abroad as important hubs of political activity, where the nuns maintained transnational connections, contributing to both religious and political discourses that transcended geographical and national boundaries (Walker 2003).

This broader European context, informed by religious and cultural mobility, further complicates the imaginary representation of nuns as mere objects of fantasy or desire in literary spaces. Literary portrayals of nuns across Europe, such as those in French and Spanish literature, significantly broadened the imaginary around their roles and identities. Indeed, the French *La Religieuse* by Denis Diderot presents a young nun's tragic struggle against oppressive religious life, while Spanish authors like María de Zayas portrayed nuns in more empowered positions, such as in *Desengaños amorosos*, where nuns navigate societal pressures with sharp intellect. The writings and lived experiences of early modern nuns in continental Europe reveal a much richer narrative, one where women were not just confined to cloisters. Therefore, literary depictions of nuns as isolated or sinister figures in Gothic or anti-Catholic narratives can be seen as a reductionist view, overlooking their roles as powerful agents in early modern European society. As such, the convent emerges not only as a space of seclusion but as a centre of intellectual and spiritual activity that allowed women to engage with the broader socio-political currents of the time. Therefore, as in real life, the representation of nuns within the literary spaces of the religious house does not invariably depict them as archetypes of goodness. There are other examples hereof in history. To name just a few, Geoffrey Chaucer's nun in *The Canterbury Tales* is considered a liar (Warren 2019); Giovanni Boccaccio's nuns are carnally insatiable in *The Decameron* (Hanning 2021); Isabella's virtue is up for grabs in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* because she is the focus of the play's sexual dynamic, as Angelo finds himself almost overwhelmed with desire, and even the Duke proposes marriage to her (Beauregard 2003); and Eliza Haywood's unnamed Scheherazade-like heroine in *Fantomina: Or, Love in a Maze* (1719) keeps the attention of her lover Beauplaisir by repeatedly changing her appearance. Furthermore, nuns have occasionally been subjected to politicisation, particularly in the works of anti-Catholic authors of Gothic literature, such as Matthew Grego-

ry Lewis, Ann Radcliffe, and Charlotte Brontë. These writers depicted their nun-like characters in a harsh manner who inflicted severe physical harm or portrayed them as evil, vindictive ghosts. Within these stories, nuns are objectified as elements evoking fantasy, desire, and repulsion (Milbank 2009).

However, such a characterisation cannot be made without considering that it stemmed from both the sense of freedom and the aura of mystery created by the idea of isolation inherent in convents and monasteries in public opinion and among writers. In this regard, Katharine Rogers states that after the convents were dissolved in England (1535):

> they played an active part in English fantasy, reflecting writers' assumptions about "Popery" and about women living without men. In popular literature the convent appeared as an alternative to marriage, imposed on a nubile young woman by tyrannical relatives; it typified the oppression of women which prevailed in Roman Catholic Europe in England. In the late seventeenth century, monastic spaces were complex spatial structures — a codified symbolic spatial model — that were used by many writers as the setting for their stories. (Rogers 1985: 297)

Hence, according to Rogers, convents were perceived as places of social constraint because they were characterised by limited autonomy, isolation, religious obedience, and limited opportunities. However, it is important to note that perceptions of convents varied widely. For some women, convents offered a degree of independence, intellectual pursuits, and spiritual fulfilment not easily available in the secular world. Additionally, not all convents were equally restrictive, as some allowed more engagement with the outside world and provided avenues for personal growth and development within the confines of religious life. In this regard, Kate Chedgzoy highlights a spatial reimagination of nunneries from an historical viewpoint[1] because the dichotomous nature of convents –

[1] It is important, if not necessary, to remember that from an historical point of view, every single abbey and priory in England – some 800 in total – was dissolved or closed on the orders of Henry VIII between 1536 and 1540. Of the nearly 4,000 English women religious who went into exile from the mid-sixteenth century, many are known to us only by name. But for some, such as those described here, it is possible to write full biographies thanks to their surviving papers, contemporary accounts, obituaries, and notable role in creating, defending, managing, and expanding their communities. In several instances, their legacy

confinement and freedom – implies that monastic spaces are fundamental elements «in which women's ambiguous relation to the central institutions of early modern society could be reimagined» (Chedgzoy 2000: 56).

2. Seeing in the Narratives: Literary Voices from Transgressive Nunneries

To understand the cultural context that Behn was depicting in her novellas, it is first necessary to examine the English understanding of nuns in a seventeenth-century context. In her study of female communities and convent sexuality, Chedgzoy explains how, to the people of England at this time, Catholic monastics were largely unknown because «between the dissolution of the convents between 1536-39 and the foundation of the Bar Convent at York in 1686 there were no convents» (Chedgzoy 2010: 61). For more than a century, there were no Catholic nuns in England, so for English audiences and readers, the nun was a fantasy and was used by authors as a sort of mythical character that most people had never actually encountered. Therefore, writers made generous use of artistic license to create stock characters who represented what Frances E. Dolan calls the «part of Catholicism that is to be dismissed rather than feared: the absurdity of female authority and separatism» (Dolan 2007: 509).

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to convent life continues in the survival of their houses, as in the case of Frances Dickinson's Carmel of Port Tobacco (now located in Baltimore) or the English Augustinian Convent in Bruges, where Catherine Holland professed in 1664. Other houses, founded in exile, came to England in the mid-1790s as they sought to escape fresh persecution following the French Revolution. Among these were the Benedictine Convent of Brussels (whose first prioress, Joanne Berkeley, had been installed in 1599) and Our Lady of Consolation, Cambrai, where Catherine Gascoigne had served as abbess for 44 years. The Catholic Relief Act of 1829 lifted an injunction on convents that had been in place since the Reformation and set the stage for a boom in convent building. Many of these buildings were designed or adapted for a new type of Roman Catholic religious community known as an "active congregation". Unlike earlier orders, in which nuns lived contemplative lives in enclosed convents, active sisters undertook work outside the convent. These women established schools, orphanages, care homes, hospitals, and refuges. The new convents had to meet a range of practical and modern needs, and though they often looked similar in style to their medieval predecessors, they were very different in layout and use. For more, see Meyer 1981; McAdam 1999; Mangion 2008; Erler 2013; Clark 2021.

During that period, the societal notion of women living separately from men was considered absurd, as women were stereotyped as incapable of attaining success in their endeavours. They were either horrible, sadistic abbesses or fragile young women with no autonomy, desperately in need of men to save them by stealing them away from the confines of the convent and marrying them. In the literary works of that time, the monastic institutions themselves were a standard setting. In this respect, Tonya McArthur argues that authors often made use of convents as plot devices:

> the possibility of cloistration is often a threat to young women who disobey their cruel parents, an escape from them if they wish to avoid an unavoidable marriage, a barrier that prohibits amours and thus increases desire, a last resort for women who are ruined, or a temporary depository for women who are not needed currently in the narrative. (McArthur 2007: 602)

Convents as a plot device were often vilified, used as a threat for young women who failed to conform to societal norms. Moreover, these places were among what Michel Foucault (1986) called *heterotopias*. Unlike utopias, Foucault describes heterotopias in every culture as:

> […] real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. (Foucault, 1986: 24)

Hence, heterotopias are in-between sites – between actual social spaces and ideal or utopian ones – that can be designated for isolation, punishment, and exile – such as mental institutions and prisons – but it may also represent sacred sites, including monasteries, nunneries, and cemeteries, or prohibited spaces, like brothels[2]. They function as a space of juxtaposition and transgression, reflecting a microcosm of the broader social order found in the natural world (Peters & Humes 2003). Additionally, it is seen as a cultural wellspring (de Certeau 1984) and the primordial source of all social spaces, «established at the very inception of society» (Foucault 1986: 27). Nevertheless, while some English imaginations degraded the

[2] See Urbach 1998, Milojevic 2003.

convent to a prison, others idealised it as a place where women could develop their intellectual, spiritual, and sexual potential more fully than they could anywhere in actual society at the time. Indeed, such a space would seem to denote reformation if it were not for the material realities and cant connotations attached to "abbess" and "monastery". As a matter of fact, nunneries reputedly encouraged "Sapphism", while monasteries run by abbesses had their own associations with sexual activity. Jane Schulenburg explains that «double monasteries were free from the close monitoring or scrutiny of the local bishops», providing «a symbiotic relationship wherein … monks and nuns lived, worked, and worshipped in close proximity»; «both frequently came to know … members of the opposite sex» (Schulenburg 1989: 263)[3]. Cant discourse evolved accordingly; Gordon Williams defines an "abbess" as «a proprietress of a nunnery (brothel)» (Williams 1994: 1), while John Cleland's 1749 novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* jokingly refers to Fanny's bawd as «venerable mother Abbess» (Cleland 2008: 43). In fact, throughout the eighteenth century, "abbess" and "monastery" were slang for "brothel mistress" and "bawdy house"[4].

The changing point was in the use of the protestant monastery described by the early feminist Mary Astell. In a *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1697), the ladies (who, like nuns of the period, were drawn from the upper class and supported by endowment and funds from their families) would follow the ordinances of the Church of England. They would perform its services daily and observe all its fasts, as nuns did, in order to rigorously examine their consciences and pluck out every last fibre of sin. They would choose plain clothes, food, and lodging – though without fussing over details – for they would not want to spend on luxuries money that could be used to help the poor. Truthfully, Astell suggested an alternative

[3] "Double monasteries" were mixed communities of nuns and monks or priests that, in England, always seem to have been under the control of an abbess. Scarcely any of these double monasteries survived, and new foundations were like communities of Benedictine nuns until the Reformation. «Given this natural dichotomy there has been a tendency among historians to specialise in the study of one group or another, or to draw contrasts between the two periods with the stricter claustration and poorer intellectual standards of the Benedictine period compared unfavourably with the greater opportunities for participation in and equality with the world of the male religious which apparently existed earlier» (Yorke 1989: 95).

[4] See Grose (1788) and Potter (1795). The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites continued use of "Lady Abbess" to at least 1837.

for all women seeking an escape from a world she deemed as «noise and hurry» (Astell 1697: 42), as well as to avoid the «rude attempts of designing Men» (*ibid.*: 99), whose deceitful flatteries «under pretence of loving and admiring you really served their own base ends» (*ibid.*: 43). Astell's emphasis, however, was on self-fulfilment rather than the self-denial enjoined on nuns: «All that is required» of the ladies is «to be as Happy as possibly you can, and to make sure of a Felicity» (*ibid.*: 44).

3. "What's with Behn, nuns, and nunneries?": Miranda and Isabella

The place that Behn occupies in Restoration drama, novels, and poetry has been amply credited. Her unmistakable stimulus in the development of the English novel has been the particular focus of critical attention in recent years. Essays and books by many scholars have prepared the ground for a fertile discipline in literary studies focusing on this remarkable figure[5].

Published for the first time separately from *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave* (1688), *The Fair Jilt: or, the History of Prince Tarquin and Miranda* (1688) and *The History of the Nun: or, the Fair Vow-Breaker* (1689) were the first of Behn's novels to include her name on the title page. This detail about Behn's authorship affirmation is important because the majority of the texts at that time were published anonymously, and Behn herself, at the beginning of her career, published under the *nom de plume* of "Astrea". Indeed, as Anna Maria Cipriani claims, «[h]er involvement and passion in opposition to the established contemporary ideologies paved the way for new visibility of women as authors, which characterised the turn of the eighteenth century» (Cipriani 2022: 14).

During the Restoration, a woman could join a religious order «without binding or perpetual vows» (Behn 1998: 273), and this is the case with the two main characters in Behn's novellas, who are quite different from each other. *The Fair Jilt*'s story revolves around Miranda, a charming and manipulative young woman who is «amorous, but extremely Inconstant: She lov'd one for his Wit, another for his Face, a third for his Mein; but above all, she admir'd *Quality*: *Quality* alone had the power to attack her entirely» (*FJ* 14-15). In this case, a person of "quality" refers to their social class, per-

[5] See, among many others, O'Donnell 2004; Salvaggio 1993; Behn 1992-1996; Todd 1997, 2017; Hughes 2001, 2002; Hughes & Todd 2004; Spencer 2000; Rubik 2011.

haps an aristocrat or a member of royalty, and it highlights Miranda's social ambition, which does not exactly conform to that of a nun. Unlike Miranda, Isabella in *The History of the Nun* has a very quiet temperament, such that «her Conduct and Discretion appear'd equal to her Wit and Beauty, and she encreas'd daily in Reputation, insomuch, that the Parents of abundance of young Noble Men, made it their business to endeavour to marry their Sons to so admirable and noble a Maid" (*HN* 17). While Isabella's ingenuity leads her to death because of the murder of her two husbands, Miranda remains unpunished in the face of her frauds and crimes.

Comparing the nunneries where the two sisters are enclosed, both can be seen to exercise the function of an «in-between place» – that is, the middle ground between heaven and earth, religion and irreverence, perpetual vows and freedom – because the two women are, in Behn's terms, «gallopping nuns» (*FJ* 6) who take only temporary vows. While waiting for matrimony, the women are sequestered by their families in places where society should safeguard their interests by offering a secure haven for their aspirations. It is immediately apparent that this «quality» (*FJ* 11) refers to what it would mean for society rather than the happiness of the two women, who are forced to stay in a place that they do not recognise as a "house of devotion". According to Susan Goulding, Isabella and Miranda are women:

> of "Quality" whose family names would be tarnished by an unwanted pregnancy or even rumored alliance. In a broader sense, these convents serve to protect the interests of society's "quality" by providing a place that safely harbors their desires. But even these temporary orders fail because the structures upon which they are built would deny the sexual urges of women, even women of "quality", as well as their power to control; they are "societally-determined" structures that subordinate female desire. (Goulding 2008: 41-42)

In Goulding's terms, by being physically and socially distanced from the broader community, Isabella and Miranda are expected to act in accordance with the rules of their orders within the walls of religious institutions that should keep their reputation "safe" and under control. However, like any social restriction, the denial of liberty may inadvertently engender greater complications. Nevertheless, the two monastic houses are different from each other. In *The Fair Jilt*, Miranda and the other nuns receive visits «from all the Men […] especially Strangers» (*FJ* 10). Moreover, they could receive "*Presents, Balls, Serinades* and *Billets:* All the News, Wit, Verses, Songs,

Novels, Musick, Gaming, and all fine Diversion, is in their *Apartments* […]. So that to manage these *Gallantries,* there is no sort of Female Arts they are not practis'd in, no Intrigues they are ignorant of, and no Management of which they are not capable» (*FJ* 10). In *The History of the Nun*, the rules are more restrictive, and Isabella can «receive and entertain all the great Men and Ladies, and the Strangers of any Nation, at the Grate» (*HN* 13).

Though constraints on women's prerogatives aimed to foster order, their imposition risked unintended consequences that could undermine community cohesion. This is also evident when comparing the two main characters of the novellas. On the one hand, Isabella is «tall of Stature, […] a perfect brown-hair'd Beauty, Eyes black and lovely, Complexion fair; to a Miracle, all her Features of the rarest proportion, the Mouth red, the Teeth white» (*HN* 15) but is not aware of her beauty, and she is described as «a Saint in the Chapel, and an Angel at the Grate» (*HN* 27). On the other hand, Miranda is tall with «bright hair, and hazle eyes, […] adorn'd with a Grace that Imagination cannot reach» (*FJ* 11). Her body is so beautiful that the priest whom she wants to seduce at all costs wonders «whether he saw a Woman or an Angel at his Feet» (*FJ* 44). Unlike the ingenue Isabella, Miranda knows how to use her eroticism to achieve her goals. Indeed, Father Henrick and Prince Tarquin both fall victim to her beauty. They are both ruined by her economic ambitions: Henrick dies after being accused of rape, and after Tarquin tries to kill Miranda's sister, he is injured by his executioner, who misses the mark and hits his shoulder. Although Isabella also kills two husbands, the difference between the two women is that Isabella pays with her life for the crimes she commits because she is executed after a long speech.

At first glance, *The History of the Nun* and *The Fair Jilt* seem to fulfil conventional male expectations for Restoration readers: Isabella's alleged female wrongdoing is punished, and male stereotypes about women are reinforced (Craft 1991). However, in an era when women were often punished for circumstances beyond their control, Isabella and Miranda took charge of their own situations and lives. Indeed, Behn's female characterisation exemplifies the development of female agency, showing that women can express agency in many ways.

In *Gender and Language in British Literary Criticism, 1660–1790*, Laura Runge notes that Restoration femininity was typically characterised by «a perceived need for female chastity» (Runge 1997: 69), but Behn goes beyond the expected gender stereotypes to suggest an ambiguous in-between space, as evidenced by her ambiguously gendered narrators and their actions. Inside or outside the walls of the nunneries, the two nuns exercise their

agency to live and act beyond monastic and social conventions. On the one hand, Miranda writes and «deliver[s] the Letters to Father *Francisco*» (*FJ* 39) and «approach'd him» (*FJ* 43). She pretends to want to make her confession, and when she is refused, she starts screaming: «I will ruin thee; and make no Scruple of revenging the Pains I suffer» (*FJ* 49). She is not innocent at all because she later describes her fictitious rape precisely to the Provincial:

> I was lead into this Room, to make my Confession; where, he locking the Door, I had no sooner began, but he gazing on me, took Fire at my fatal Beauty; and starting up, put out the Candles, and caught me in his Arms; and raising me from the Pavement, set me in the Confession-Chair; and then—Oh, spare me the rest. (*FJ* 54)

These words denote her sexual self-awareness because, in Goulding's terms, in this novella «of amorous intrigue, of power struggles […] sexuality is a tool» (Goulding 2008: 41) through which the narrator expresses her «sexual energy that cannot be contained» (*ibid.*: 42). Indeed, Miranda gets married even though she was «possess'd by so many great Men and Strangers before» (*FJ* 54). On the other hand, through her agency, Isabella asserts her independence and autonomy in diverse ways that challenge both social and religious conformity. The façade of a virtuous woman concealed an ambitious social climber. Initially, she shows a quiet temperament: «she beheld with no admiration, and nothing created wonder in her» *(HN* 17). Unlike Miranda, she does not care about men by being the «Heart-breaking of a thousand Lovers» (*HN* 19). However, as soon as Isabella grows up, she starts feeling emotions and cannot manage the passions that make her different from what she thought she was. Indeed, when her roommate Katteriena is talking to her about her brother, she says:

> thou blow'st my Flame by thy soft Words, and mak'st me know my Weakness, and my Shame: I love! I love! and feel those differing Passions!—*Then pausing a moment, she proceeded,* Yet so didst thou, but hast surmounted it. Now thou hast found the Nature of my Pain, oh! tell me thy saving Remedy? Alas! (*reply'd Katteriena*) […] And is it a Disease, (*reply'd* Isabella) that People often recover? Most frequently, (*said* Katteriena) and yet some dye of the Disease, but very rarely. Nay then, (*said* Isabella) I fear, you will find me one of these Martyrs; for I have already oppos'd it with the most severe Devotion in the World: 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. (*HN* 40-41)

The only idea of experiencing sexual desires for Henault «gives [her] a thousand Thoughts» (*HN* 41), and «the more she conceal'd her Flame, the more violently it rag'd, which she strove in vain by Prayers, and those Recourses of Solitude to lessen» (*HN* 45-46)

The result of these unbridled emotions leads her – consciously – to unfortunate consequences. Indeed, she keeps reacting with complete freedom: she steals jewels and gold from the monastery:

> and 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, as she us'd to do, in the Night, to her Devotion, she stole so dexterously out of the Monastery, as no body knew any thing of it [...]. She found Henault waiting in his Coach, and trusted none but an honest Coachman that lov'd him; he receiv'd her with all the Transports of a truly ravish'd Lover, and she was infinitely charm'd with the new Pleasure of his Embraces and Kisses. (*HN* 88-89)

Though she cannot govern her initial feelings, she can control how she outwardly expresses them after escaping from the monastery. A measured response is shown when Isabella starts asking for forgiveness from her family because she and Henault were considered «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» (*HN* 90). And that is exactly the case: Isabella and Miranda act as criminals because they conspire to escape, violate the most sacred walls, steal goods from their families, and kill lovers and husbands. However, their examples could be exceptionally valuable for several reasons. Firstly, because Behn compares the experience of women living in enclosed spaces to highlight the contradictory liminal spaces where legitimate socio-cultural forms are remodelled. Secondly, because she participates in a cultural discussion about the role of women in society by using her writing to challenge a patriarchal system that placed limits not only on women who wrote but on women in general. In Goulding's terms, Behn uses narrators and nuns to go beyond the stories and whose positioning of nuns as "criminals" and "vow-breakers":

> contributes to a social and historical critique grounded in patriarchally-defined limits upon women. Convents are containers, and Behn uses them to invert, literally, orders. The fact that these stories are usually marked as Behn's late work – after her great dramatic

> output, after the bulk of her poetical creations, and along with her translation efforts – further testifies to Behn's turning to fiction as a resource to argue against a lifetime – professional and personal – of orders and limits. (Goulding 2008: 39)

In this regard, Jacqueline Pearson states that Behn uses «the nun as metaphor» (Pearson 1993: 245) – and, I would add, the nunnery itself – to undermine «the contradictions faced by women in the late seventeenth century […] powerful within the confines of fiction, powerless outside» (Pearson 1991: 47). Jane Spencer's analysis focuses on nuns as "doubles" based on «a fictional tradition of the nun both as sexual transgressor and as writer» (Spencer 2000: 168), and the nun is considered more than someone who transgresses, violating a law, or going beyond a boundary or limit contained by «walls and vows". Indeed, she is the interpretation key for «understanding Behn's fiction as the work of a single, professional, skilled author» (Goulding 2008: 39).

4. Conclusions

Writing on the cusp of the emergence of the novel, Aphra Behn consistently focused her prose fiction on the experiences of young female characters who had not yet entered society but who had no "place", either in the home or in society. She placed those young female characters in situations that denied sexual expression and used "orders" of nuns as indications of levels of commitment. By pursuing education, choosing alternative lifestyles, entering male-dominated fields, and embracing their sexuality on their own terms, Behn's narrators have defied society's attempts to restrict and define them. Their stories speak to the multidimensional nature of women's experiences and their determination to define their own identities. Examining women's agency beyond social expectations reveals their courage to imagine and enact new ways of being in the world. Although she is beheaded, Isabella maintains respectability, with her final speech restoring her social reputation, and Miranda lives out her days with Tarquín «in all … Tranquility": "They say Miranda has been very penitent for her Life past, and gives Heaven the Glory for having given her these Afflictions, that have reclaim'd her, and brought her to as perfect a State of Happiness as this troublesome World can afford» (*FJ* 120).

Through Isabella or Miranda – as well as *Oroonoko*'s Imoinda – Behn can be considered one of the most influential writers in the intellectual history of feminist or queer thought (Todd 2017). Despite the fact that the

female narrator does not have enough power to resist the demands of society, Behn reverses expectations: Miranda avoids punishment, and while Isabella perishes, her death is a sort of monitory. Pearson points out that «despite the loud proclamation of a moral purpose, the vow-breaking bigamist murderess is also a heroine […]. An apparently simple fable about God's punishment of violated vows […] in the end becomes something quite different» (Pearson 1991: 51). The problem is in the lack of options for young women in the past and not in women themselves, forced to live a life they would not choose at all. Indeed, Behn's female protagonists demonstrate the failure of society through the creation of socio-cultural conventions and constraints. As with any other attempt at constraining the lives of living beings, Behn's heroines' fates show that the lives of women cannot be contained either in a convent or in any other marginal place of confinement.

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The Author

Carla Tempestoso

Carla Tempestoso is currently a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in English Literature at the University of Calabria. She is working on the Italian translations of the Bluestocking Circle's writers by adopting both a literary and a digital perspective. She is editor-in-chief of "Margins", a multilingual WordPress open-access journal promoted by the Department of Humanities, University of Calabria, that focuses on literary, linguistic, and cultural studies. Her interdisciplinary research interests include Anglo/Caribbean Studies, Migration Studies, and Digital Humanities, and she is the author of several journal papers and books in these fields.

Email: carla.tempestoso@unical.it

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