

# SERAGLIOS AND CONVENTS: APHRA BEHN'S HEROINES IN THE HOUSE(S) OF LOVE\*

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## ABSTRACT

I argue in this article that in *Oroonoko, or the History of the Royal Slave* (1688) and *The History of the Nun* (1689), Aphra Behn forwards the connections between the feminised spaces of the seraglio and the convent, presenting them as equally exotic and gendered for the English reader, but also as equally constraining for women in their everyday lives. In *Oroonoko*, the she-narrator instructs Imoinda into the narratives of the “civilized” west by reading diverting stories of nuns to her. At the same time, her tale in *The History of the Nun* represents the convent as another liminal space of interaction between the sexes which confines Isabella and originates her bouts of love and passion, following the model of the *Lettres portugaises*. This article will explore both spaces of confinement and the strictures Imoinda and Isabella experience in them, but also Behn’s originality as creator and narrator in making the two narrative models converge.

KEYWORDS: Aphra Behn, early novel, stories of nuns, oriental tales, seraglio and convent.

## SERRALLOS Y CONVENTOS: LAS HEROÍNAS DE APHRA BEHN EN LA(S) CASA(S) DEL AMOR

## RESUMEN

Defiendo en este artículo que en *Oroonoko, or the History of the Royal Slave* (1688) y *The History of the Nun* (1689), Aphra Behn hace converger los espacios feminizados del serrallo y el convento, presentándolos como construcciones de género, igualmente exóticos para el público inglés, pero también como espacios que limitan el día a día de las mujeres. En *Oroonoko*, la narradora instruye a la princesa Imoinda en las narrativas de la “civilización” occidental, leyéndole historias de monjas para entretenerla. Al mismo tiempo, la narración de *The History of the Nun* representa el convento como espacio limítrofe de interacción entre los sexos que confina a Isabella y origina sus episodios amorosos, siguiendo el modelo de las *Lettres portugaises*. Este artículo explorará ambos espacios de confinamiento y las restricciones que Imoinda e Isabella experimentan en ellos, pero también la originalidad de Behn como escritora de ficción y narradora al hacer converger ambos modelos narrativos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Aphra Behn, novela temprana, historias de monjas, narrativas orientales, serrallo y convento.

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## 1. BEHN'S TURN TO FICTION: STORIES OF NUNS AND TALES OF THE SERAGLIO

Aphra Behn (1640-1689) was well aware of the power of stories to offer a privileged view of gender and politics, and as potential agents of ideological transformation not only in her fiction, but also earlier in her plays. In her stories of nuns –particularly in *The History of the Nun*– and in her colonial tale of the seraglio, *Oroonoko, or the History of the Royal Slave*, she compares the experience of women living in both spaces –the convent and the seraglio. I argue that Behn fuses both traditions in *Oroonoko* and that she foregrounds what it means for women to live in enclosed spaces like the cloister in *The History of the Nun*. Both places, the African Otan and the convent in the Continent, are represented as equally exotic and constraining for women. I argue that Behn fosters the similarity of the experiences of the oriental woman and the nun in her two *novellas*, in which a number of set features and elements recur: a common situation of confinement, the existence of an all-women's community, and an amorous plot or lover's discourse, associated either to the “uncivilized” west or to backward Catholic practices. In the following pages, I will concentrate on how these female types interact in their respective communities, showing how they use either passive resistance –as Imoinda in *Oroonoko*– or self-negation –as Isabella in *The History of the Nun*– as means to circumvent strict modes of social repression and public invisibility, achieving similar results in the end: Imoinda's single act of agency makes of her a willing victim at Oroonoko's hands, to leave behind the confinement of the seraglio and the pitiful experience of slavery in the colony, while Isabella “relinquishes” her moral superiority when she abandons the convent but enters wilfully another type of seclusion when she breaks her religious vows and gets married, falling into a downward spiral of polygamy, murder and finally self-destruction. I follow in this article Susan Goulding's recent study, “Aphra Behn's ‘Stories of Nuns’: Narrative Diversion and ‘Sister Books,’” as she offers an enlightening comparative view of three of Behn's major *novellas* –*The Fair Jilt*, *Oroonoko* and *The History of the Nun*– forwarding the connection between stories of nuns and stories of the seraglio from a feminist perspective. It is my purpose to propose a complementary reading of both *novellas*, not only to identify the woman in the seraglio and the nun figure, but most specifically to foreground the narrative constituents of two contemporary and convergent novel forms: the oriental tale and the nun story. In so doing, I focus on the connections between these two species of fiction, and therefore on Behn's work as creator of amorous tales, rather than on feminist politics alone.

Behn became acquainted with prose fiction at the end of her literary career. After many years working for the stage as a successful playwright, and most probably

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due to the decline that theatre experimented after the commotion of Popish Plots and Charles II's demise, Behn penned a number of fictional stories, regarded by editorial hand as "histories and novels,"<sup>1</sup> which would influence a whole generation of later writers, starting with her epistolary romance, *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684-1687), and following with her famous colonial and anti-slavery narrative *Oroonoko, or the History of the Royal Slave* (1688). In the thriving decade of the 1680s, Behn also translated and adapted from the French – *A Voyage to the Isle of Love* in 1684, *La Montre: or the Lover's Watch* in 1686, and *A Discovery of New Worlds* in 1688, to name a few – originals by Paul Tallemant, Balthasar de Bonnecorse and Bernard de Fontenelle, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, she wrote an essay on prose translation and other shorter novels, remarkably three which included nuns in their plots, namely, *The Fair Jilt, or the Amours of Tarquin and Miranda*, *The History of the Nun, or the Fair Vow-Breaker*, and "The Nun, or the Perjured Beauty."<sup>3</sup> Especially after the publication of the Count of Guilleragues' *Lettres portugaises* in 1669, and more specifically after Sir Roger L'Estrange's translation into English of this work under the title *Five Love-Letters from a Nun to a Cavalier* (1678), the figure of the nun complaining about unrequited love grew popular among readers, and many writers imitated the style of the *portugaises*, Behn and Delarivier Manley amongst them.<sup>4</sup> Apart from the French original and its translation, Dolores Altaba-Artal argues that there are some Spanish sources of Behn's 'nun' novels by María de Zayas – "The Vanquished Impossible" (*El imposible vencido*) and "The Most Infamous Revenge" (*La venganza más infame*) – from *Love Novels* (1637) and *Love Deceits* (1647), which the English author might have known, or at least "she [was] aware of the content of the frame, which is not included in any circulating translation" (Altaba-Artal 152). Irrespective of their national origin, Susan Goulding refers to a popular type of text, the so-called "sister books," which Behn might have found inspirational to create

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<sup>1</sup> Several editions of Aphra Behn's short fiction were printed for Samuel Briscoe and Richard Wellington between 1696 and 1700, all of them including these words in their titles.

<sup>2</sup> Line Cottegnies analyses the reasons why Behn was interested in translating works from the French, which go beyond the merely commercial to consider the intellectual and political potential of her sources. Cottegnies refers, for example, to the similarities between the intended audiences of the French originals and of Behn's texts (222-223). In relation to *Voyage*, Mary Ann O'Donnell argues that Behn's version goes beyond mere translation, and that in fact her poetic rendering improves the original (95).

<sup>3</sup> "The Nun, or the Perjured Beauty" appeared in Samuel Briscoe's 1698 edition *All the Histories and Novels Written by the Late Ingenious Mrs Behn* for the first time and is one of those works generally attributed to Behn that might raise some suspicions of her authorship. See Leah Orr's article "Attribution Problems in the Fiction of Aphra Behn" on this topic.

<sup>4</sup> Behn was one of these remarkable imitators in *The History of the Nun* and "The Nun; or the Perjured Beauty," but also Delarivier Manley in *Letters* (1696), where Manley constructs a *roman à clef* in which her nameless narrator and protagonist complains to her lover of her enforced exile from London and the court. In a very catchy title, Manley announces the inclusion of a letter in imitation of the *Five Letters from a Nun to a Cavalier*, attributed by her to some Colonel Richardson Pack (1682-1728), a miscellaneous writer of the early eighteenth century, though his authorship is improbable due to his age.

her stories of nuns. These books took the form of biography to narrate the stories of abbesses and nuns, and managed to approach women's narratives –historical or fictional– from the perspective of feminist thought. Whether historical or fictional, these texts chose women as their main focus (41).

Other types of stories of nuns different from Behn's populated the market in the 1680s, like the English rendering of the anonymously translated French *nouvelles*, *The Adamite, or the loves of Father Rock*, *Venus in the Cloister: or the Nun in her Smock*, both published in English in 1683, and *Eve Revived: or, the Fair One Stark-Naked* and *The Amorous Abbess, or Love in a Nunnery*, appearing the following year. The first three were pornographic stories and the last one a love intrigue involving nuns and a cavalier, a shorter version of Nathaniel Noel's *The Circle, or, Conversations on Love and Gallantry* (1675), itself a translation of Sébastien Brémond's homonymous novel.<sup>5</sup> In such different texts, as much as in Behn's nun novels, two common elements recur: the description of nuns as easy preys to seduction and the representation of the convent as the context of romantic discourse and as the site of sexual struggle between galloping nuns and foreign cavaliers. In more transgressive narratives, as some of the ones mentioned above, the convent becomes "the school of love" for young and inexperienced nuns who learn very soon from corrupted religious tutors and priests to give free rein to their passion, often using religious imagery and sacred objects to perform it. In *Eve Revived: or, the Fair One Stark-Naked*, for example, sister Angelica is entrusted by the Jesuit and spiritual director Father Stanislas with St Pancras' stick, a relic used to give succour to the sick and that he employs to exchange letters with her without being detected. Angelica calls the stick "the worker of Prodigies" and Father Stanislas' letter contained in it, she claims, "Fills, Comforts, and Flatters me with the most Solid hopes I was ever Fed with" (B5, 15, 16).

Sexual innuendo and female confinement were also pervasive in many oriental fictions of French origin, which were very popular among the English reading public about the same years. These narratives sometimes evoked the scandalous affairs of the French and English courts of Louis XIV and Charles II, satirising their sexual mores and their rulers' political weakness. Set in the exotic territories of Africa and Turkey, these *novellas* portrayed the life of secluded women, mistresses and favourites of the Bassa, the Grand Signior, or the King. Some of these texts were notorious for their satirical purpose and booksellers often used fictitious names to avoid public derision. In the late 1670s and early 1680s, Richard Bentley commissioned English translations and published some French editions of such works. In 1680 and 1681,

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<sup>5</sup> Robert I. Letellier attributes *The Adamite: or the Loves of Father Rock* to Paul Tallemant (*L'Adamite, or le jésuite insensible*, 1683), *Venus in the Cloister* to Jean Barrin (*Venus dans le cloître or la religieuse en chemise*, 1682), while *The Circle* he attributes mainly to François Salvat Monfort, but possibly to Sébastien Brémond's *Le Cercle, ou conversations galantes*, 1675 (370, 187, 336). He also points to William Downing as the author of *Eve Revived: or the Fair One Stark-Naked*, a translation of *Éve ressuscitée or la Belle sans chemise, aventures plaisantes*, 1683 (371). The dedicatory epistle of this work, though, is signed out by one "G.R."



respectively, Brémond's *Hattige: or the Amours of the King of Tamaran and Homais, Queen of Tunis* saw the light, allegedly published in Amsterdam by Simon the African. In the first text, beautiful and promiscuous Hattige fell from grace in the eyes of her king for using the seraglio for her own amorous intrigues, whereas in the second one, wanton and vindictive Homais often tricked her husband, the king, by taking a lover, Ibrahim, to her apartment in the seraglio. On the occasion of the early publication of Brémond's *Hattige* in 1676, though, both author and bookseller were accused of libel against King Charles II, as it allegedly described his affair with Barbara de Villiers. Apparently, Bentley was charged for commissioning and bounding six copies of the novel, which had been previously turned down by H. Oldenburg (McKenzie and Bell 106-107). Bentley also commissioned the printing of Jean de Préchac's *The Princess of Fess: or, the Amours of the Court of Morocco* (1682), a counterexample, however, of the former ones, as virtuous Alzira keeps her honour intact for Prince Ali Hamet, and uses gardens and seraglios for lawful purposes only.<sup>6</sup> It is my contention that, in very similar terms to stories of nuns, oriental fictions of the late seventeenth century were often equated with tales of seduction and forbidden love. The foreign Catholic practices, in the case of stories of nuns, as well as the distance that the exotic settings and alien customs portrayed in oriental novels, allow for stories ripe with sexual permissiveness in some cases –like *Homais*, *Hattige*, and the pornographic stories mentioned earlier– and with moral steadfastness and self-restraint, in others –as it happens in *The History of the Nun*, *The Princess of Fess* and remarkably in colonial fictions like Behn's *Oroonoko*.

## 2. “SMALL TALES, GENERALLY OF LOVE”: *OROONOKO*

In *Oroonoko*, Behn deploys the constituents of the pastoral by exploring a discourse on love that focuses on two exceptional characters, Oroonoko and Imoinda, whose amours stand out against the background of the penuries of slave trade and the English and Dutch colonial rule of Surinam. In this work, which is partly a revision of the narrative conventions of romance, especially in the first African section, and an experiment with realistic techniques, in the American one (Rosenthal 159), Behn creates a contrast, or better, an illusion of alterity when she depicts her two protagonists as innately good and honest, models of absolute virtue in an unfeeling world, while most Europeans and other African characters are treacherous and unreliable. Both in the seraglio and later in the colony, a sophisticate

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<sup>6</sup> Ros Ballaster distinguishes between oriental narratives set in the Ottoman empire and those set in the independent Islamic empire of Morocco, “which were largely represented in English writing of the eighteenth century through the genre of the captivity narrative,” and thus far from narratives in which the fabulous takes precedence (*Fabulous* 20).



discourse on love and its ways is developed.<sup>7</sup> For example, Imoinda recognizes Oroonoko as the prototype of the gallant man very early in the novel, when “[m]ost happily, some new, and till then unknown Power instructed his Heart and Tongue in the Language of Love” (C4, 27). In return, she is also enticed by his overpowering gallant discourse, which inspires her “with a Sense of his Passion” (27). In spite of being young and inexperienced, their sincere inclinations soon instruct them in the language of love, which, far from artifice, elevates them above their fellow men and women: “[Imoinda] was touch’d with what [Oroonoko] said, and return’d it all in such Answers as went to his very Heart, with a Pleasure unknown before. Nor did he use those Obligations ill, that Love had done him, but turn’d all his happy Moments to the best Advantage; and as he knew no Vice, his Flame aim’d at nothing but Honour, if such a Distinction may be made in Love” (C4, 27). This powerful discourse in favour of true love and true nobility anticipates Oroonoko and Imoinda’s honourable actions later in the novel, while it condemns the rotten morals of the so-called ‘civilized’ and Christian countries of the west.

Though Oroonoko and Imoinda fall in love at first sight, and make solemn vows in secret which they keep against odds, Imoinda’s plight begins very soon when the King of Coramantien, Oroonoko’s grandfather, sends her the royal veil to take her as a wife, marking in a real and a symbolic way that she is a covered virgin reserved for his pleasure alone in the Otan, reminiscent of Turkish seraglios, in Srinivas Aravamudan’s words (59). In the face of “corrupt” masculinity, represented by the King’s whimsical behaviour, Imoinda stands as the new heroine of amatory fiction, giving free rein to her true feelings when she is alone, thus showing her vulnerability, helplessness and innocence (Richetti 21). Furthermore, this practice of taking the veil, which is assumed by Imoinda as part of the obedience paid to the monarch, is also envisaged as the respect divinity is due –it “was not at all inferior to what they pay’d their Gods: And what Love wou’d not oblige *Imoinda* to do, Duty wou’d compel her to” (*Oroonoko* C4, 32)– and associates her with the heroines of stories of nuns, also related to amatory fiction. Unceremoniously, she becomes instantly the King’s favourite and learns what a life of confinement in the Otan means for women like herself: to abandon the world and the intercourse with other men, who are forbidden entry in the premises, to dress richly and to entertain her master dancing seductively only for him. A kind of seraglio, the Otan is associated with love scenes in confinement, where young and beautiful women become the easy preys of patriarchal privilege. In this feminised space, new wives are also guarded and victimised by old matrons like Onahal, who instructs new and inexperienced favourites into the “wanton Arts of Love” (*Oroonoko* E, 49). The role of these ageing

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<sup>7</sup> This is a common practice in Behn’s fiction. See, for example, the narratorial comments about the power and the ways of love in *The Fair Filt* and the importance given to Philander’s spurious use of amorous discourse with Silvia in the first volume of *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*, and Silvia’s manipulation of the language of love to seduce Octavio in volume three.



guardians is instrumental to keep the structure of rank and privilege intact.<sup>8</sup> This representation of younger and older women sharing spaces in the Otan reminds us further of the life of confinement of nuns and abbesses in the cloister in many examples of nun fiction, and anticipates in particular Isabella's experience in her aunt's convent in *The History of the Nun*.

Imoinda's passive and heroic resistance features her attitude in the Otan, as she often cries, throws herself to the King's feet and implores his mercy to protect her virginity (D, 33-34), and most significantly she is powerless when the King tries to abuse her and she is saved by his sexual impotence rather than by her own agency. Other times she waits patiently for deliverance, smothering her feelings to save her life: "her Heart was bursting within, and she was only happy when she cou'd get alone, to vent her Griefs and Moans with Sighs and Tears" (D4, 42). The only way to freedom she can envisage, according to Oroonoko's premonitory dream, is "to fly with her to some unknown World, who never heard our Story" (D3, 38), anticipating ironically their experience of slavery. Imoinda is also passive when she becomes an attentive listener of Oroonoko's military exploits in the Otan, while Oroonoko plays the hero and conceives a plan to see Imoinda in her "miserable Captivity" (D4, 45), assisted by Aboan, his second in command, and Onahal. Their encounter is discovered by the King who sells Imoinda as a slave, who thus exchanges one experience of confinement for another. After their miraculous encounter in the colony, Oroonoko and Imoinda assume their new identities, Caesar and Clemene, and are instructed into the teachings of European figures like Trefry or Behn herself, who narrate and reproduce their captivity for the reader.

Trefry's narration only comes to us indirectly, through Behn's narrator. He becomes one of many narrative figures in the text, along with Oroonoko himself and with Imoinda, we are led to assume, as there are parts of the story, especially the events in the Otan, that might have been only related by her (Rosenthal 157). Trefry is Oroonoko's confidant when the latter tells him about his romantic engagement with Imoinda, and as narrative presence in the text, he acts as Behn's *alter ego*, encouraging an encounter with the Other, Oroonoko, in almost equitable terms which is reminiscent of some oriental novels of the period. A very popular example of such novel at the time was Brémond's *The Happy Slave* (1677), which had several editions till the end of the century. In Brémond's work, Mahomet Bassa, the most powerful man in Tunis, shows his respect for his slave, Alexander, a young Italian count, and confesses to him the new object of his love, Laura, another Italian slave. In Brémond's novel, Alexander does not reciprocate his master's confidence, though, since he falls in love with the Sultaness, with whom he finally escapes. In Behn's narrative, Oroonoko also listens to Trefry's knowledgeable and honest discourse,

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<sup>8</sup> Aravamudan identifies Onahal as a typical character in oriental fictions of the Restoration, often at the head of court intrigues, and associates this figure with Aphra Behn, as one of Charles II's "cast mistresses", previously a spy and later destitute and forgotten by her King in the Low Countries (60).





which he relies on. Oroonoko and Imoinda's fatal story, Behn's narrator anticipates, will be finally related not by Trefry himself, "who design' it" but "dy'd before he began it," but "only [by] a Female Pen" (H4, 108). Oroonoko's confession of love and his romantic idealisation of his mysterious African princess comes true for Trefry when Oroonoko meets Imoinda in the plantation. As Trefry concludes after their encounter, their love is now fitter for a novel than for reality: "*Trefry* was infinitely pleased with this Novel, and found this *Clemene* was the fair Mistress of whom *Caesar* had before spoke" (K4, 136). This episode deploys the meanings of "Novel" in the text, and presents the plantation as a "community," a large audience that shares Oroonoko's wonderful stories. By extension, in its reference to novelty and fiction, the scene also anticipates another crucial moment in the narrative, central to this article, when the narrator Behn tells "Stories of Nuns" to Imoinda, whose implications will be further analysed.

With the purpose of entertaining Oroonoko and Imoinda and to prevent a slave revolt, the narrator tells them edifying stories, particularly "the Lives of the Romans, and great Men" to Oroonoko and stories of nuns to Imoinda, "teaching her all the pretty Works that I was Mistress off" (K4, 142). Masculine heroism, represented by the lives of the Romans, counterbalances feminine eroticism, associated to stories of nuns by the narrator (Chalmers 155). Hero Chalmers argues that Behn instructs the two slaves into their newly-acquired roles and identities, granted by their new names, by exposing them to both heroic and romantic narratives, thus exploring "the use of representation through fictional identities in order to achieve cultural compliance and reassuringly familiarize difference" (187–88). Chalmers claims further that Behn uses the term in the sense of "novelty" or "news," but also that she means a fictional, amorous plot with which both Oroonoko and Imoinda could identify (189). The former as much as the latter stories are meant to be entertaining and edifying for the protagonists, according to the expectations of their sexes: historical exemplarity and greatness for Oroonoko, educated in the values of the west and renamed as Caesar, and amorous discourse and fiction for Imoinda, closer to Behn's experience as writer and creator. Clearly she has in mind her own nun novels – *The History of the Nun*, "The Nun; or, the Perjur'd Beauty," and *The Fair Jilt*—and her telling of the stories to Imoinda seems to reveal an interesting detail about the reception of early fiction in the period, as she addresses her nun tales to a female audience, suggesting that they might be generally the target of such stories. The telling of these tales to a female slave by Behn herself might be interpreted in different ways as well: Behn's stories of nuns could be cautionary tales for Imoinda, who is familiar with the experience of seclusion, but they might be also read, as Ros Ballaster suggests, as the narrator's way of entertaining the young slave into the love plots of apparently naïve heroines (*Seductive* 95). On the one hand, Behn might be inducing Imoinda to conform to her new fate, and on the other, the nuns' stories of love in the cloister might be familiar for Imoinda-Clemene, a former favourite in the Otan and now a slave in the colony. Jaqueline Pearson remarks about this scene that this reference to the stories told by Behn's narrator unveils ironically her own powerlessness as teller of Oroonoko and Imoinda's terrible fate: "seeming to be in the powerful position of dispensing favours on those without power, she is actually





powerless, constrained to prostitute her literary art by using as a method of social control ‘Stories of Nuns’ and Romans” (“Gender” 136). Behn’s narrator chooses a discourse based on lies –the fictional stories of nuns not merely to divert Imoinda but to procure her identification with them and to make her accept her situation of confinement. In so doing, Goulding suggests, Behn’s narrator is no innocent, but is complicit in Imoinda’s willing subordination (51).

As it was mentioned earlier, Behn rewrites romance, and thus traditional forms of heroism in *Oroonoko*, where the protagonists’ agency, and especially Imoinda’s, rely on extreme suffering and passive endurance instead of on the exercise of violence to effect change: Imoinda’s only instance of agency consists in preserving her vows till the end, even to the risk of her life. And we may interpret her behaviour in two ways: either as the logical corollary of her noble nature, or as the result of consuming transgressing stories of nuns. In contrast to *Oroonoko*, women’s power in Behn’s short fiction, particularly in *The Fair Jilt* and *The History of the Nun*, is associated to violence and crime in the form of rape and murder. In the next section, I will study such a type in relation to Isabella, the protagonist of *The History of the Nun*, a perfect example of what Ros Ballaster has called “the female plot” in Behn’s prose fiction (“Pretences” 193).

### 3. “A VIRTUE OF NECESSITY”: *THE HISTORY OF THE NUN*

In seventeenth-century England, exotic eroticism was not merely associated with oriental motifs, but it was further related to nuns and nun stories, particularly because they were both Catholic and women. While Catholic teaching proclaimed the superiority of virginity over marriage, Protestant and Anglican discourse as developed by Erasmus of Rotterdam, Martin Luther and John Calvin derided female virginity in favour of matrimony, particularly because it was an inferior spiritual state (Jankowski 11). With the exception of the Virgin cult associated to Queen Elizabeth I, for whom virginity entailed not merely an unmarried state and chastity, but most importantly a notion of unchallenged political power, female virginity and nuns by extension were considered freaks of nature, and most frequently women were denied the ability to preserve the vows of virginity, since their nature compelled them to marry (Jankowski 90-ff). In the seventeenth century, nuns played as well an active role in political intrigue, especially during the Interregnum, as many of them living in the continent became instrumental in procuring the king’s restoration to the throne. One of those relevant nuns was the Benedictine abbess Mary Knatchbull, who exercised her political influence from her convent house in Ghent, where she lived between 1650 and 1696, in favour of the royalists in exile, basically working as a spy for Charles II. Knatchbull dispatched and received letters from Charles’s advisers most times safely, since nuns were often associated with the figure of the foolish and naïve woman, and it was generally believed that no evil could be expected from them (Walker 22). In exchange for their services, Catholic nuns like Knatchbull were patiently waiting for a better



time of religious toleration in the eventual accession of Charles to the throne, as well as for his economic support to found new houses, both in England and abroad, thus strengthening their networks of influence and suggesting at least their moral authority at a time when they were officially denied political visibility.<sup>9</sup> In spite of some spare visits to the cloister in Ghent, though, Knatchbull and her community did not finally get much either from Charles's magnanimity, or from his successor, James II, who openly married a Catholic and converted to Catholicism, although the latter favoured their religious house at Ipres (Walker 19), the 'Iper' cloister where Behn situates *The History of the Nun*. The nun was, then, an ambivalent figure who became a commodity particularly in seventeenth-century fiction, often associated with sexual fantasies, as they turned into easy preys of influential men, even men of the church, who exerted their manly and public authority over them. They were also connected with the notion of exile—from their country, and more generally from the world, and from marriage—more even so in the case of English women who retired to religious houses in the Continent (see Dolan 509). Finally, the nun's renunciation to the world was often seen as barbarous, cruel and even murderous, yet another form of political passivity with terrible consequences in the public arena, as Isabella's story makes clear.

Due to their alleged inexperience of the world, nuns became objects of derision and were subject to censure in late seventeenth-century fiction, not only because they were women, but because, as Catholics, they were expected to behave according to their strict rule. As Francis Dolan notes, however, not all nuns lacked experience of worldly matters. The critic chooses as example the figure of Hortense Mancini, Duchess of Mazarin, Charles II's Catholic mistress, who eventually left her husband and for a time entered a convent where his aunt was the abbess. Behn dedicated *The History of the Nun* to this very figure (Dolan 522, 523). In the usual manner of prefaces and dedicatory epistles, Behn addresses her story, a "fair unfortunate Vow-Breaker", to another, nobler and more experienced one, with the purpose of either gaining her protection or provoking her pity (*History of the Nun* B). As Dolan continues, the nun became in the seventeenth century a gender construction by means of the repetition of a pattern of sexuality and behaviour: women living in seclusion and marginality and in trouble to channel their needs and anxieties. Though the life of fictional nuns would not exactly correspond to the situation of English nuns living in cloister in the Continent, the figure turned into a pervasive motif both in seventeenth-century writing and contemporary constructions of femininity, "because of what she can tell us about attitudes to women's sexuality, agency, and authority, about attitudes toward Catholic capacities for loyalty and critical judgment, and about the tangled worlds of sexual, political, and theological fantasy" (Dolan 512). I argued earlier in this essay that Behn plays with all these

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<sup>9</sup> Kate Chedgzoy remarks that a tradition of monastic life was also available to women in English soil, and that nuns like Mary Ward were responsible for the foundation of a large number of religious houses in the Continent (61).



notions in her construction of fictional nuns, and that the she-narrator in *Oroonoko* has this in mind when she teaches their stories to a troubled Imoinda-Clemene. It is precisely the feature of vow-breaking, Isabella's violation of religious vows, and in general the figure of the nun as promoter of romantic plots, that distinguish the heroine of *The History of the Nun* from Imoinda, who holds steadfast to her betrothal to Oroonoko even in the face of extremely adverse circumstances. Both share, though, a similar status, as they are two strong female presences, as Jacqueline Pearson contends, that face "impossible or paradoxical moral dilemmas which test them to the utmost" ("Short" 193).

In her study of female communities and convent sexuality, Kate Chedgzoy reads the convent as a fictive space "in which women's ambiguous relation to the central institutions of early modern society could be reimagined" (56). Chedgzoy's main argument finds an illustration in Behn's story, where the narrator claims that young nuns need to make "a Virtue of Necessity", very similarly to young wives, who are led "to make the best of a bad Market" (*History of the Nun* B4, 7). Behn's narrator claims to speak about her own experience, as she had also been once "an humble Votary in the House of Devotion" (*History of the Nun* B3, 6), a galloping nun who had not taken perpetual vows, a type already used by Behn to describe Miranda in *The Fair Jilt*. By bringing the models of the young nun and the young wife together, Behn appeals to women's responsibility in making the right choices in a world in which men are often perjurers, as they "broke Vows made to some fond believing Wretch, whom they have abandon'd and undone" (*History of the Nun* B1, 2). In this way, in the face of the "Vanities of the World," the narrator decides to abandon monastic life before taking her vows:

I rather chose to deny my self that Content I could not certainly promise my self, than to languish (as I have seen some do) in a certain Affliction; tho' possibly, since I have sufficiently bewailed that mistaken and inconsiderate Approbation and Preference of the *false ungrateful World* (*full of nothing but Nonsense, Noise, false Notions, and Contradiction*) before the Innocence and Quiet of a Cloyster. (*History of the Nun* B3, 6; my italics)

Isabella's wrong choices are motivated, I argue, by her faulty "reading" of the "false ungrateful World" that Behn describes in each case. Living in the cloister, as much as living in the seraglio, or the colony, amounts to a similar experience, the author seems to imply. In her analysis of the literary fortunes of *The History of the Nun*, Jacqueline Pearson emphasizes the connection between the nun and the wife, underlining the "exotic" nature of the nun figure: "[I]n Restoration fiction as a whole, nuns feature as bizarre and eroticized exotics rather like the harem women who are in contemporary fiction not their opposites but their doubles. In Behn's fiction the nun instead becomes a metaphor for the female condition" (Pearson, "History" 246). It could be further argued that, like the nun, exotic representations of women in the seraglio, such as Imoinda, are also illustrative of the female condition, regardless of the distant setting of oriental and colonial stories.

The narrator of *The History of the Nun* sets Isabella's cautionary tale at a nunnery in Iper, a continental town which was formerly a Spanish dominion but



of late a French possession (B4, 7). After his wife's death, Isabella's father divides his estate, one half going to a Monastery of Jesuits which he joins, and the other half reserved for the Monastery of St Augustine, Isabella's destination. Still a child, without experience of the world, she is entrusted to her aunt's, the Lady Abbess, guidance. She did not mean to take orders, but only to be protected and receive an education that would make her marriageable to a nobleman in the future. Her fortune was closely guarded by the Abbess, though, that had in mind to secure her niece's money for the convent: "[S]he us'd all her Arts and Stratagems to make her become a *Nun*, to which all the fair Sisterhood contributed their Cunning" (B5, 12). In the cloister Isabella grows in beauty and learning and is soon exposed to the eyes of ladies and noblemen, who come from afar to listen to her talk and have a sight of her at the grate. As other "galloping nuns" in Behn's fiction, Isabella's life was easy and devoted to gallant conversation and entertainment. Meanwhile, she excelled in her beauty, her mind and virtues, which she improved every day. The convent stands for her as a surrogate domestic space, an only-women refuge that protects her from the world outside, but also as a showcase for potential lovers or suitors. In Goulding's feminist interpretation of this story, "[c]onvents are containers, and Behn uses them to invert, literally, orders" (39). In *The History of the Nun* marriage is the order inverted, though in order to evade its constraints, Isabella accepts a subtler form of seclusion in the cloister. Not very differently from the role of women in the *Otan*, Isabella's power lies in her beauty and her piety within the safe walls of the cloister. Ironically, her life in the convent has not prepared her to face the reality outside (B5, 13). The news of her taking perpetual vows shocks the town, and among them young Villenoy's, who passionately proposed to her without success. He witnesses the ceremony of Isabella's taking the veil, that Behn's narrator describes as "fatal" (B5, 21). She declares herself immune to love, and her indifference to Villenoy's plight is considered an act of cruelty. Love discourse turns into religious discourse, as her suitor is said to suffer "a thousand Tortures" for her sake, and to be "dying Adoring her" (B5, 23). She mortifies herself as she feels she is responsible for incensing Villenoy's love, a "fair Cruel *Nun*" (C2, 27).

Isabella renounces the love of men, but she is not insensible to the discourse and the trappings of sentimentality, as she shed "abundance of Tears" when she was told that Villenoy was dying for her (B5, 24), or when she got finally infatuated with young Henault's love. Her exemplary modesty and self-restraint – Isabella had been "a Saint in the Chapel, and an Angel in the Grate" (1689, C2, 27) – brings to mind Imoinda's steadfastness in *Oroonoko*, as Trefry contends: "she deny's us all with such a noble Disdain, that 'tis a Miracle to see, that she, who can give such eternal Desires, shou'd herself be all Ice, and all Unconcern" (K1, 130). After falling in love, though, Isabella is ready to quit her vows, to leave the convent and to take her jewels back from her aunt, the abbess (*History of the Nun* E5, 87-88). In contrast to Henault's pessimistic view of his life as a farmer, Isabella has construed in her mind a sugary version of kingship, in the manner of the pastoral, an idea that she has conceived due to her youth and inexperience of the world, and that brings her much closer to the aristocratic ideal represented by the black royal pair:



I thought of living in some loanly Cottage, far from the noise of crowded busie Cities, to walk with thee in Groves, and silent Shades, where I might hear no Voice but thine; and when we had been tir'd, to fit us down by some cool murmuring Rivulet, and to be each a World, my Monarch thou, and I thy Sovereign Queen, while Wreaths of Flowers shall crown our happy Heads, some fragrant Bank our Throne, and Heaven our Canopy. (*History of the Nun* E5, 85)

In this light, the concern of Behn's female narrator in *The History of the Nun*, in a similar vein to *Oroonoko*, is with storytelling. In both *novellas*, she concentrates in the power of stories, discourses and narrative frames, to instruct characters into patterns of behaviour. In the early pages of the tale, she contends, for example, that Isabella has learnt to recognise the stereotypical symptoms of love from Sister Katteriena who had entered the convent to forget a former love. Later on, she offers a view of the nuns at the convent longing for Henault's tales at the grate, "for he always brought them all that was Novel in the Town, and they were glad of his Visits, above all other, for they heard, how all Amours and Intrigues pass'd in the World, by this young Cavalier", and he corresponded to them by "endeavour[ing] to assume all the Gaity he could, and t[elling] 'em all he could either remember, or invent, to please 'em" (*History of the Nun* E2, 76, 77). Even later in the story, when Villenoy believes Henault to have died in battle, he decides to write to Isabella and make her acquainted with the sad news. He then tried to renew his love for her, gaining her initial resistance through storytelling: "he diverted her, by giving her Relations of Transactions of the Siege, and the Customs and Manners of the *Turks*" (*History of the Nun* F5, 109).

In an ironic reversal of Behn's telling "Stories of Nuns" to Imoinda, Villenoy wins Isabella by entertaining her with stories about the Other, once more testifying to the figure of the storyteller, and to Behn's own defence of her right to literary authority. Behn's power of expression contrasts with her heroine's passive self-renunciation (Spencer 193-194). Isabella is one of Behn's most eccentric heroines, we could argue, as she oscillates between the opposite prototypes of the virtuous woman and the murderer, always relying on her good name to kill her two husbands and try to escape unscathed. After some time, Isabella's crimes are brought to the open and she is accused of double murder. Ironically, Behn's narrator claims that her mien and face were majestic at the scaffold, and that she looked "all Chearful as a Bride" (*History of the Nun* H, 147), still an appealing and seductive image of femininity on the verge of death, as her final speech becomes a warning to all vow-breakers.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The figure of Behn as narrator and storyteller stands out in *Oroonoko* and *The History of the Nun*. Her fictional persona is often situated in the frame of the story, but sometimes she is also conversant with the characters, identifying with them, especially with female figures, with few exceptions, like her hero Oroonoko. These are tales about love and romance which explore the potential of storytelling to create new worlds, but most times to illustrate the failures of the *status quo*, as



it is portrayed by a she-narrator and woman writer who is considered an outsider. Ballaster refers to the purposes of seventeenth-century amatory fictions, and to Behn's amatory novels in particular, when she argues that "[t]he telling of a story of seduction [...] is also an act of seduction" (*Seductive* 69). In this light, I have mentioned many examples of the seductive effects of stories on Imoinda and Isabella. In particular, I have claimed that Behn's telling stories of nuns to the black female slave finds a parallel in Villenoy's telling stories about the Turks to young Isabella. Both cases illustrate the narrator's aim in favouring cross-cultural encounters with the Other and her reading of storytelling as associated specifically with the figure of the woman writer. Telling stories, were they stories of nuns or tales of the seraglio, is an act of empowerment and authority that Behn concedes primarily to her narrators, even at the cost of dispossessing her characters.

The authority of Behn's narrator contrasts in the two selected stories with the helplessness of her heroines, who are devoid of actual power, and who either choose self-sacrifice and passivity as forms of political intervention in *Oroonoko*, or employ the art of dissembling and storytelling to protect their good name no matter the obstacles they find in their way, be they polygamy or murder, as in *The History of the Nun*. Pearson contends that in Behn's fiction women are not only creators but most importantly "they are texts" ("Gender" 118). In the selected novels, stories about convents and seraglios become almost interchangeable at a time when nuns and oriental women were deemed similar exotic objects. Moreover, we are led to interpret the ending of moral tales like the former, as the author's responsibility to denounce the restrictions imposed on women like Isabella, "revealing a countertale of female power sympathetically depicted beneath a surface which seems to offer quite simple moral condemnations of dangerous female autonomy" (Pearson, "Gender" 138). In spite of her identification with Behn's ideal of royalism and true kingship, Imoinda is no exception to the rule; her goodness and extreme virtue only contribute to her death. Though fitting the type of the traditional hero, Oroonoko also accepts Behn's narrative authority, though in so doing he becomes feminised. He is another ex-centric and exceptional figure about whom we are even told that "he lik'd the Company of us Women much above the Men" (*Oroonoko* K4, 142). Told by a "Great Mistress" (*Oroonoko* K4, 143), his story, as much as Imoinda's, turns into another object of consumption and exchange in the literary market which is meant to outlast their exceptional heroism.

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