

“THE GREATEST EXTASY O BLISS”:  
REALISM, SUBVERSION AND EROTICISM  
IN *THE DUMB VIRGIN; OR THE FORCE OF IMAGINATION*

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ABSTRACT

The 1690s was a decade of great productivity in terms of prose fiction in England. *The Dumb Virgin; or, the Force of Imagination*, dating from 1698, exhibits some of the narrative methods employed by Aphra Behn in the earlier stages of her literary career with *The Fair Jilt* and *Oroonoko*, published ten years previously. In this article, we will firstly examine the traces of realism evident in the presentation of the characters, in the family of the Venetian senator (Rinaldo), his wife and children (Maria, Belvideera and Cosmo, or Dangerfield). We will analyse the locations, the historical and chronological references, popular beliefs of the time, the reflection of the emerging wave of scientific methodology –even the intervention of the narrator as a character– all of which structure and define the story as a whole. In addition to this, we will study the misfortunes that occur throughout, in order to demonstrate the mastery of an author who played a fundamental role in paving the way towards the development of the novel. Secondly, we will explore the question of gender that lies beneath the surface of the narrative, drawing attention to the prominence of the young women and the reflection of their desires as well as the description of their romantic experiences. Thirdly, we will investigate the portrayal of eroticism in the female protagonists (particularly with regard to Maria), which confers a notably feminine aspect to the narrative, in contrast to the interpretation of the female body as defective. Lastly, we will see how Aphra Behn deconstructs the dominant *status quo* of her time, in terms of female desire and the explicit portrayal of women in 17th century society. The author depicts characters that draw attention to the idea of the projection of desires, as well as the presence and active participation of women in society.

KEYWORDS: Aphra Behn, New Science, Dumbness, Erotization, Narrative Techniques, Prose Fiction.

RESUMEN

La década de 1690 es fértil para la ficción en prosa en Inglaterra. *The Dumb Virgin; or, the Force of Imagination* data de 1698 y despliega algunos de los recursos que Aphra Behn viene ensayando desde que inaugurara su etapa narrativa con *The Fair Jilt* y *Oroonoko* diez años antes. Este artículo indaga, en primer lugar, los rasgos caracterológicos del realismo que se observan en la familia del senador veneciano (Rinaldo), su esposa, sus hijas y su hijo (Maria, Belvideera y Cosmo o Dangerfield). De esta forma se analizan los lugares, las



coordenadas temporales e históricas, las creencias populares, el reflejo de la nueva ciencia e incluso la intervención de la narradora como personaje los cuales enmarcan y modelan la ficción. Asimismo se estudian las adversidades que tienen lugar a lo largo del relato para de esta forma dar cuenta de la maestría literaria de la escritora que allana el camino hacia la novela. En segundo lugar, se ahonda en las cuestiones de género que subyacen al tejido textual de la obra señalando el protagonismo de las jóvenes, el reflejo de sus deseos así como la articulación de su enamoramiento. En tercer lugar, se investiga la plasmación de la erotización en la figura de las protagonistas (concretamente en la persona de María) que aporta un ingrediente notable de la femineidad, frente a la interpretación que considera al cuerpo de la mujer como defectuoso. Finalmente, se infiere cómo Aphra Behn deconstruye el statu quo imperante en la época en lo que atañe al deseo femenino así como a la explicitación de la mujer en la sociedad del siglo XVII ya que genera unas actantes que capitalizan precisamente la proyección del deseo, la presencia de la mujer en la sociedad y su participación activa.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Aphra Behn, nueva ciencia, mudez, erotización, técnicas narrativas, ficción en prosa.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: BEYOND THE FEMINOCENTRIC TALES OF LOVE

The story we will deal with in this chapter is part of a tradition that extends back to the Middle Ages, specifically to the German poetic novel *Erec, Gregorius o Der gute Sündler* (Hartmann von Aue) which takes up the plot of an old English poem included in the “Vernon Manuscript” (Summers 418). In the thirteenth story of *Il Novellino*, Masuccio Salernitano tells the story of Mariotto and Giannoza, characters who were subsequently reimagined by Luigi da Porto as Giulietta and Romeo and later still by Matthew Bandello. In 1562, Arthur Brooke translated the story into English under the title of *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, using an indirect translation from the French version of Pierre Boaistuau (1559). William Painter published his prose version as *Palace of Pleasure* (1566). The following century saw the publication of *L’Inceste Innocent, Histoire Véritable* by Desfontaines. The plot of *The Dumb Virgin* also appears in *The Dutch Lover*, Aphra Behn’s third theatrical piece. After Behn’s interpretation of the subject continued to be explored, as shown by *Le Criminel sans le Savoir, Roman Historique et Poétique*.

*The Dumb Virgin; or The Force of Imagination* (1698) addresses issues typical of women’s literature of the seventeenth century –issues centred around the female sex—such as pregnancy, reproduction, physical and mental illness, loneliness and the position of women within society. However, the story goes beyond the prototypical “feminocentric tales of love,” since alongside the usual themes of love, jealousy and passion, there are other more complex interpersonal issues, including even incest and extreme suffering, all of which eventually come to a tragic end. Aphra Behn (Zozaya 265-270, Goreau 20-40) reconsiders the position of the female sex in society. She presents the reader with a woman who wants to make her dreams come true, whose decisions upset the balance in the narrative –that is, the breaking up of thematic harmony (heterotaxis). As a text, *The Dumb Virgin* marks the culmina-



tion of the 1690s, a prolific decade in terms of prose fiction (Figueroa-Dorrego 83). Aphra Behn's efforts in this form begin in 1688 with *Oroonokoo* and *The Fair Jilt*.

## 2. COORDINATES OF PLACE

One of the first geographical aspects to appear in the story is the island in the Adriatic Sea, depicted as an earthly paradise in terms of its climate and the flora and fauna it contains. It is also presented as a place of high-level commerce. It is to this highly symbolic setting that the central character sets out, wishing to spend a few days in peace and quiet, away from her place of origin in Italy and her husband Rinaldo. She is accompanied on her journey by her young son.

Another setting is the boat aboard which she travels, where the majority of those accompanying her are women. However, the primary *locus* and the setting for the great majority of the action is Venice. A specific reference to location comes with the description of the fight between Rinaldo, Gonzago and Erizo. Gonzago and Erizo are said to head to Rialto, a reference to Ponte di Rialto over the Grand Canal in Venice, designed by Antonio da Ponte and constructed in 1591. The disagreement between Erizo and another character, Dangerfield, also arises as the narrator explains how the Englishman is appointed captain of the Rialto by unanimous decision. In so doing, he supplanted Erizo who was initially going to be awarded the position. Erizo is tormented and filled with envy at this appointment given to a foreigner and –more importantly– his enemy.

The basilica of San Marco is another clue to the location of the narrative, serving as a link between history and fiction. Dangerfield and the Venetian Gonzago, both of them in love with the same woman, come to blows and challenge each other to a duel outside the back entrance of the church at six o'clock in the morning. At the time stipulated the Englishman shows up and encounters not only Gonzago but also Erizo, who has also appeared seeking vengeance on Dangerfield. One fights for Maria, the other for Rinaldo's other daughter. Alerted by the sound of clashing swords, the Italian politician comes to meet Dangerfield in person; having already heard news of him and his exploits from his brother the admiral. At the time, Rinaldo was attending the morning service inside the church, which was also the place where his wife had been buried. This gives an indication of the elevated social status of this family, given that they have a private crypt here. It is worth mentioning the fact that the characters are all carrying swords is indicative of their high social status. This detail is a recurring factor in other works of this author, who seems to have been very concerned with the "quality" of her characters. The senator urges the duellers to reconcile their differences and invites them to dine at his house. However, Gonzago and Erizo refuse on the grounds that they are unable to accept Rinaldo's having appointed a foreigner to a position of authority in honour of his service to the State (Behn 432).

Within the geographical framework of Italy, one location stands out for its extravagance: the grand dukes' palace where Francisco celebrates his naval victory and where the *crème de la crème* of Italian society flock. A large part of the key narrative is played out here, with its fair share of misfortunes, grievances and fateful news.



### 3. HISTORICAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL DETAIL

The escort boat sails quickly for two hours until encountering the main ship. “and plying her warmly the space of two hours, made her a prize, to the inexpressible joy of the poor ladies” (423). When the threat of the Turkish pirates passes, the protagonist’s mind turns to the fate of her son, realising that she is unable to do anything, since “they were above ten leagues from any land” (423). She orders her brother in law to sail as fast as possible day and night, but still they do not succeed in finding Gasper or her son. The precision of detail employed by Behn here serves to support the verisimilitude and credibility of the story, a technique of which the author makes use throughout her work.

There are also other notable historical references that serve as markers in the text: “Francisco, brother to Rinaldo, was made admiral of the Venetian fleet, and upon his first entrance upon his command, had obtained a signal victory over the Turks” (425-426). This is the first time that the character’s name appears in the story. Until now, he had remained nameless, referred to only as the captain of the ship escorting the other boat carrying his sister in law. The historical detail in question is the Italian naval victory over the Turkish forces.

With the return of the victorious admiral, we are presented with a young English gentleman who fights on a voluntary basis, renowned for his bravery and fearlessness. When he appears at the celebrations, mention is made once again of his extravagant turban, this time as a symbol of veneration for a Christian woman: “and this turbant (taking it off) is now to be laid at the foot of some Christian lady” (428). The etymology and literal meaning of his name (Danger-field) point to his bravery and daring. Senator Rinaldo wishes to make Dangerfield a candidate for the position of captain aboard the Rialto, as at that time the senior officials had to elect someone to that post. While the admiral Francisco wants the appointment to go to Erizo, the senator wishes to reward the Englishman for his efforts in the victory over the Turks.

A custom of the time reveals the presence of Dangerfield, hidden in Rinaldo’s house, when Gonzago and Erizo see his servant by the entrance to the building. In this case there are two key issues; firstly, the high social status of the Englishman; secondly, the custom of travelling to social functions and important events in horse-drawn carriages driven by servants.

Lastly, the reference to the Turkish merchant is of significance, demonstrating as it does the emerging commerce at the time. We are told of an individual who undertakes the journey from Smyrna to London: “that my suppos’d Father, who was a Turkey merchant [...] [who] told me ’twas time to undeceive me, I was not his son, he found me in the Adriatick sea, ty’d to two planks in his voyage from Smyrna to London” (442). This reference to merchants appears in other of Behn’s texts; the issue also arises as the action reaches its climax. This view is supported by the finances which –besides his last wish to find his parents– Dangerfield has inherited. The inheritance is indicative of the fact that trading was a prosperous business at the time (“left me all his inheritance”) (442).

The question of money surfaces again when, at the end of the story, Belvideera gives her father’s inheritance to her uncle, only keeping enough to allow her to live in



reclusion for the rest of her days. This is not the only time when this particular issue appears Behn's literary work: it is also notable in other texts, often in an even more pronounced manner. The concept of time is another parameter that enhances the level of detail and "truth-telling" (Villegas-López 207) in the text and which is the subject of this study. One first example is at the ball, when the narrator specifies that after half an hour a handsome gentleman enters, dressed in the elegant attire of an Englishman. Another indication is the specific outlining of the time period during which Dangerfield and Maria give in to their passions, their urges empowered by the eroticism of their physical encounter, which lasts more than two hours (Behn 441). Later, when the Englishman goes downstairs upon hearing the sounds of his servant's death, another fight breaks out which continues for more than ten minutes (442).

#### 4. BETWEEN POPULAR BELIFS AND THE EMERGING SCIENCE

Behn's writing corresponds with the scientific advances of her day. Towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the cosmological perspective was becoming pseudo-scientific. At that time, a new epistemological framework was being established alongside an emerging scientific order with figures such as Kepler and Galileo, as well as Newton, Locke and Hobbes and the founding of the Royal Society. This period saw Charles II order the construction of the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, the first stone of which was laid in the 11<sup>th</sup> August 1675. It was the time of William Harvey and his investigations into physiology and anatomy, the age of Thomas Sydenham and his descriptions of previously unknown diseases such as gout and rheumatic fever. It was also the time in which James Young produced his *Currus Triumphalis* and his investigations into amputations. It is this exact context that is echoed in *The Dumb Virgin*, in linking the state of mind of a pregnant woman with the development of the foetus (Stiker 93).

One related detail appearing early in the text is the explanation given by the doctors consulted as to the causes of the first daughter's deformity. Their explanation points back to the mother's suffering on the island in the Adriatic sea, and particularly the extreme stress experienced when her boat was boarded by pirates: "Physicians being consulted in this affair, derived the cause from the frights and dismal apprehensions of the mother, at her being taken by the pyrates" (Behn 424). With the arrival of the second daughter, who is born dumb, the explanation given by the narrator is that this "defect the learn'd attributed to the silence and melancholy of the mother, as the deformity of the other was to the extravagance of her frights" (424). Here, the doctors are referred to as "the learned" and the conclusion is given in the indirect style, the same form of speech used earlier in proposing the likely cause of the other daughter's deformity. An thematic index related to this one is that Isabella, in *The History of the Nun*, loses her unborn child as a result of the torment caused by her husband's decision to go to war – a decision which he then reconsiders, remaining with her for some time.



Maria becomes adept at sign language, to the point that Belvideera understands her as well as if she were able to speak. At this point, the narrator interjects that this is the first woman they have seen using sign language. The intervention of the narrator, in the guise of a character, is an important element: "I remember this lady was the first I saw use the significative way of discourse by the fingers; I dare not say 'twas she invented it (tho' it probably might have been an invention of these ingenious sisters) but I am positive none before her ever brought it to that perfection" (425). Aphra Behn's inclusion of this subject seems to have been ground-breaking in literary terms.

Not only does the author portray verbal language, she also refers to the method of communication used by Maria. In the following extract, sign language appears as a counterpart to verbal language, as Maria has to communicate with Dangerfield, giving him the necessary instructions to allow him to remain hidden from her sister, who is about to enter the room: "made signs that he shou'd run in to the closet, which she had just lock'd as Belvideera came in" (437). When Belvideera tells Maria not to come to the dinner so that the foreigners might not witness her disability ("but you must not appear, sister, because 'twere a shame to let strangers know that you are dumb") (437), once again the young lady addresses her by means of sign language: "she made farther signs, that since it was her pleasure, she wou'd keep her chamber all that day, and not appear abroad" (437). The author challenges convention and subverts the established social order, since individuals with disabilities of this nature were generally kept hidden from society, denied the opportunity of an education or of self-determination.

In Spain, there were a few notable figures who helped to educate the deaf, such as Fray Ponce de León, Ramirez de Carrión and Juan Pablo Bonet. We have written testimony of this from Carrión in his book published in 1629 as well as from a manual written by Bonet dating from 1620. Aphra Behn's thematic approach testifies to the investigation also taking place at that time in England. Once again, her writing echoes the scientific and intellectual advances of her day.

## 5. THE INTERVENTION OF THE NARRATOR

The narrator's voice acts as authentication of the discourse (Bowles 2). This is the "authorial I" of the text, which condemns and lays bare the marginalization of women in contemporary society. Time and again, Aphra Behn makes it very clear that she sympathises with the protagonist in her struggle to achieve autonomy, both as a woman and in terms of her own sexuality. This can be seen in *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister*, *The Fair Jilt*, *Oroonoko*, *The Lucky Mistake*, *The History of the Nun*, *The Nun*, *The Unfortunate Bride* and in *The Unfortunate Happy Lady* (Bowles 1). The first time that the narrator appears as a character directly intervening in the action occurs -as has already been mentioned- with regard to the system of communication developed by Maria. The second instance in which the narrator descends to the level of the scene, she is once again in conversation with the two young Venetian women, who inform her of the presence in the city of a brave gentleman. They mention him to her precisely because he, like the narrator, is English:



the two sisters sent presently for me, to give an account of the exploits of my countryman, as their uncle had recounted it to them; I was pleas'd to find so great an example of English bravery, so far from home, and long'dextreamly to converse with him, vainly flattering myself, that he might have been of my acquaintance. (Behn 426).

The first thing that stands out in this extract is the social status that the two sisters must have attained in order for them to ask the narrator to visit them so that they can tell her the news. It is also interesting to note that the two young women are very much involved in current affairs, insomuch as their uncle, the admiral Francisco, keeps them updated as to what is happening around them. Another point worth mentioning is the narrator's comment that the Englishman in question might be an acquaintance of hers; at first sight this seems to be nothing more than idle boasting, however, it in fact turns out to be an early glimmer of the drama that is to be played out in later scenes.

Later, the narrator appears alongside the two sisters at the ball being held at the palace. She is confused when a gentleman with an English accent arrives, later discovering that this is in fact the brave young man who has made a name for himself in battle against the Turks, risking his life on the battlefield (Danger-field). In the final stages of the story, when the neighbourhood is alerted to the noise of fighting, the narrator appears in person, informing the reader that she lives very near to Rinaldo's house: "I lodged within three doors of Rinaldo's house, and running presently thither, saw a more bloody tragedy in reality, than what the most moving scene ever presented" (444). In this instance the narrator refers to herself as a character within the narrative, adding in summation that "the father and daughter were both dead, the unfortunate son was gasping out his last, and the surviving sister most miserable, because she must survive such misfortunes" (444). It is a recurrent theme, and one that is employed in other works by Aphra Behn, for the neighbours to be alerted by the disturbance as the drama reaches its climax. It appears, for example, in the final part of *The Nun: or, The Perjur'd Beauty* when the whole neighbourhood is alerted to the clash of swords and finds the lifeless bodies of Don Antonio, Don Henrique and Elvira.

The narrator's English heritage is mentioned again when the unfortunate Dangerfield cries out to her: "O! Behold the fate of your wretched countryman" (444). The narrator-character is left speechless at this remark, overcome with emotion. The mortally wounded young man adds a metaliterary detail to the narrative when he declares: "I was your countryman, and wou'd to heavens I were so still; if you hear my story mention'd, on your return to England, pray give these strange turns of my fate not the name of crimes, but favour them with the epithet of misfortunes; my name is not Dangerfield, but but Cla—" His voice there fail'd him, and he presently dy'd" (444). The character referring to himself here as "Cla—" implores the narrator, on returning to her homeland, not to allude to the events of the story as crimes but rather as misfortunes. The prodigal son gives the necessary instructions in order that his story might be properly interpreted; at the same time he shows a desire for posterity, for *ars longa*, even possibly in terms of the fame bestowed upon his creator, the author.



It follows that in the writing of Aphra Behn, the figure of the woman is portrayed by various means; both through the development of the female characters (Maria, Belvidera, their mother) and through the employment of the objective narrator-character, whose liveliness and proximity to the action imbue the drama with unprecedented levels of verisimilitude and credibility (Ballaster 189). Aphra Behn takes a rebellious stand against female subordination in the androcentric society (Pollak 2) of her time.

## 6. MISFORTUNES

A key early occurrence, that takes the form of a meteorological event, is the storm that hits the boat on the day it sets sail, causing it to become separated from the packet boat escorting it and miss the intended port of destination. At this early stage, there is a notable amount of action and unity between the boat guarding and protecting them and the boat on which Rinaldo's wife is travelling.

The next difficulty occurs as a pirate ship is spotted rushing straight towards the boat, leading to the belief that captivity is not only highly possible but in fact imminent. The characters predict the nefarious intentions of the pirates and envisage a lifetime of slavery ahead of them, a detail that ties in with a subject dealt with by the author in *Oroonoko*.

The women on board give voice to their suffering and their dire predictions. However, it is the wife of Rinaldo that suffers the most: "but the heaviest load of misfortunes lay on Rinaldo's lady, besides the loss of her liberty, the danger of her honour, the separation from her dear husband, the care for her tender infant wrought rueful distractions" (Behn 421). In the case of the protagonist, there are in fact four misfortunes which weigh down on her. The female aspect - or rather, that of ten thousand women - is considered with the masterful expression: "had sustain'd the horrors of ten thousand deaths by dread in gone" (423).

One of the misfortunes occurs when Gasper attaches two boards together with ropes to serve as a makeshift raft in order to carry the child to the safety of the nearest shore. He swims for some two hundred feet before his efforts are discovered. Shortly afterwards we learn that Gasper dies on reaching the shore, his lifeless body discovered alongside the boards. Interestingly, nothing of the infant's whereabouts or his fate is discussed; at this point in the narrative, he has not even been referred to by his own name: the reader still does not know what he is called.

Rinaldo and his wife - who is also not referred to by name - attempt to alleviate their suffering with the birth of another child. However, with the pain of the presumed death of their son still fresh in their minds, further torment begins as their latest child, a daughter, is born deformed: "This misfortune was soon lessen'd by the growing hopes of another off-spring, which made them divest their mourning, to make preparations for the joyful reception of this new guest into the world" (Behn 423). It is worth mentioning that in *The History of the Nun*, Isabella loses her unborn child; thematic links between the two works are self-evident. Behn's artful description of the newborn child's "dis-symetry" is a powerful portrait: "and upon its appearance their sorrows were redoubled, 'twas a daughter, its limbs were





distorted, its back bent, and tho' the face was the freest from deformity, yet had it no beauty to recompence the dis-symetry of the other parts" (424). The suffering is illustrated by the mother's state of mind, overcome with sorrow: "the mother grew very Melancholy, rarely speaking, and not to be comforted by any diversion" (424).

A third child is then conceived. However, suffering and worry continue to take hold of the mother's thoughts, growing in intensity as the unborn child "grows in her belly". Another daughter is born, and a further terrible tragedy takes place when the mother dies in childbirth: "for she died in child-birth" (424). The girl turns out to be dumb from birth. The way in which the author presents the birth is notable in terms of gender issues (Pearson 46) and the depiction of the woman's suffering, as she is said to have been relieved of her suffering by death: "but no hopes of better fortunecou'd decreaseher grief, which growing with her burden, eased her of both at once, for she died in child-birth" (Behn 424). Aphra Behn emphasises a woman's suffering which, given the author's description, seems only to abate at her death.

At the same time, conflict of a different nature comes in the form of the various fights that occur throughout the novel, such as when Gonzago and Dangerfield fight over Belvideera. These confrontations are varied in nature. On the one hand, Belvideera views her sister Maria as her sworn enemy; on the other hand Erizo is convinced that his chances of securing the position of captain have been stolen from under him by Dangerfield, while Gonzago claims that during the night Dangerfield will try to come between him and his beloved Belvideera. In addition to these clashes, another notable aspect are the references to war that pervade the text, naturally reflecting the general atmosphere of conflict and the post-war environment in which the author lived.

## 7. PAIN AND DEATH: "OH, INCEST, INCEST"

Rinaldo's brother sends a boat to ask the local people if they knew what had happened to Gaspar, soon discovering that his lifeless body had turned up on the beach alongside the boards that he had tied together to keep afloat. The question which remains unresolved is the whereabouts of the young child and whether or not he has survived.

As mentioned earlier, the second death to occur in the novel is that of the mother, who dies while giving birth to her second daughter. Later on, when Erizo is overcome by anger upon discovering that he has lost his treasured military position while his friend Gonzago will surely lose the woman he loves, he kills Dangerfield's servant. Alerted by the sound of fighting, the Englishman rushes to the scene, wounding Gonzago who in turn draws his sword and stabs Dangerfield, who in turn deals Erizo a fatal blow. Rinaldo also comes to the scene upon hearing the sound of fighting. He tries to stop the brawl from escalating, and in the confusion he is tragically wounded by Dangerfield's sword, who, soon realising his mistake, begs forgiveness from the dying senator. Rinaldo then notes that the young man has given him poor thanks for the favours that he secured him from the Senate: "you have ill rewarded me for my care in your concerns in the senate today" (442).



Belvideera is also overcome with grief after being alerted to the noise of fighting; rushing towards the brawl, she witnesses the macabre scene between her father and the man she loves. When Maria arrives, she is equally distraught for her father and her lover. At this point it becomes clear that the two sisters are in love with the same man: none other than the Englishman, Dangerfield. Their suffering is compounded by having lost not only their future husband and their mother, but also their honour.

Another occurrence which adds to the tragic denouement of the narrative is when Rinaldo notices a scar on the left side of Dangerfield's neck, his wig having fallen off in the struggle. The fatally wounded father reveals that he is Cosmo, his son, the meaning of his name pointing to the concept of universal order. This is the first time in the text that the name of the child, up to this point presumed drowned in the Adriatic Sea, is stated. The dialogue between the two dying men is a central climax to the narrative of the story: "How! (reply'd Dangerfield, starting up with a wild confusion) Lost! say'st thou in the Adriatick? Your son lost in the Adriatick?' 'Yes, yes,' said Rinaldo, 'too surely lost in the Adriatick.'" (442).

From this point on, suffering upon suffering continues to destroy the good fortune that Dangerfield had been enjoying before the unfolding of the tragic climax. This is made particularly clear when he curses certain "impartial powers", making use of a form of personification as he cries out "why did you not reveal this before? Or why not always conceal it?" (442), signalling a "before" and an "after" in the narrative with his exclamation: "How happy had been the discovery some few hours ago, and how tragical is it now?" (442).

At this crucial point Dangerfield recounts his personal history, a story which is not only unknown to his father, but also to the reader, who until now could only assume that as a child he had been lost or drowned in the Adriatic Sea. The newly-discovered son explains that his adoptive father had been a Turkish merchant, who before dying had revealed to him that he was not in fact his biological father, but that as a child he had been found in the sea, tied to a few wooden boards. The merchant had taken the child in and raised him as if he were his own son and heir, only disclosing to him in his last will and testament that he should go to Venice in search of his real parents. The allusion to the subject of commerce and merchants is yet another recurring element in the works of this author, and reflects the newly emerging mercantile class of the time.

Both Belvideera and Maria are witnesses to the exchange between Rinaldo and Dangerfield, which intensifies their suffering. The youngest daughter's torment is palpable as she visibly shakes, triggering another unprecedented occurrence which we will examine further on. Meanwhile, the Englishman cries out in pain: "O! Horror, Horror, I have enjoy'd my sister, and murder'd my Father" (444).

Maria kills herself, after walking through the room and discovering her lover's sword: "at last spy'd Dangerfield's sword, by which he had supported himself into the house, and catching it up, reeking with the blood of her father, plung'd it into her heart, and throwing herself into Dangerfield's arms, calls out, 'O my brother, O my love,' and expir'd" (444). Maria's piercing cry is notable for its combined use of the two noun phrases which indicate the two aspects of the character to whom



it is directed: firstly, as the object of her love, and secondly as her brother. As well as those that have already been described, two further deaths occur: the narrative closes with Francisco seizing and then killing both Gonzago and Erizo.

Ultimately, the tragic events experienced by the mother of the three children culminate in the horrific circumstances with which the story ends. Dangerfield makes this painfully clear as he cries out “Oh, incest, incest” (444). The pages of this story are full of pain and violence, death and tragedy. The Englishman eventually declares this condemnation which brings together certain key moments in the novel, as well as revealing his own sense of profound guilt. We also learn that the foreigner is Dangerfield, the name given to him by his adoptive parents who raised him, while at the same time he is Cosmo in the eyes of his biological father.

## 8. GENDER: “WE SCORN MEAN PRIZES”

Another thematic aspect which recurs constantly in the works of this Canterbury-born writer is the denunciation of the subjugated role of women (Pearson 45). Behn presents an insightful defence of womanhood. An initial reflection, which also points to the customs of society at that time, is when we learn that Rinaldo’s wife must seek her husband’s permission before spending a few days on the island in the Adriatic Sea. The fact that Rinaldo willingly grants her request affords us a glimpse of the authority traditionally invested in the husband, and with which they tend to act: “but repeating her request, he yielded to her desires, his love not permitting him the least shew of command” (Behn 420). Travelling on board the ship, as we have already mentioned, are a large number of women. This not only demonstrates the author’s interest in matters relating to the female sex, but also her preference for female characters.

When the narrator describes the threat of imminent attack at the hands of the pirates, she chooses this moment to make a comment on feminine beauty: “beauty always adds a pomp to woe, and by its splendid show, makes sorrow look greater and more moving” (421). The author brings to our attention the emotion and suffering which the female sex externalizes with far greater sincerity and more profound sentiment than men tend to do. She goes even further than this in returning to a theme recurrent in her literary universe, that of the boundaries between pleasure and adversity, between beauty and monstrosity.

A reflection on youth in the context of unhappy events is given as the mother, carrying her child in her arms, gives voice to the following thought: “he caught her child in her arms [...] the pretty innocent smiling in the embraces of its mother, shew’d that innocence cou’d deride the persecution of fortune” (422).

Emily Bowles (1), referring to Maria, states that “she was born mute, and her struggle to give voice to her bodily needs and desires is one of the main themes of the text”. This struggle to give voice to her desires and her bodily needs is indicative of the struggles undergone by the female sex itself. A further indication of the potentiality of womanhood lies in the codes followed by the young protagonists in



matters of courtship, which place them within a clear hierarchy, situating them over the young gallants who appear over the course of the narrative.

The ball scene at the palace is important as it shows Belvideera preparing for a meeting with a handsome male newcomer, tapping him on the shoulder with her fan. This stands as an instance in which a woman can be seen to take the initiative in the context of social and human interactions, and in the context of courtship. This is remarkable when we consider the social mores of the second half of the seventeenth century (Dietz 380), whereby women were confined to the spheres of home and family. Their “romantic” interactions and their marriages were arranged by third parties and were essentially intended to advance the economic and social well-being of the family.

It is notable that the young Englishman believes the disguised Belvideera to be a man; responding by saying “if you are a man, know that I am one, and will not bear impertinence” (Behn 426). He also tells her, “I must inform you, that I am under a vow, not to talk with any female tonight” (426). Belvideera’s response is emphatic: “Know then, Sir [...] that I am a female, and you have broke your vow already” which points to young woman’s spirit and her courage. To this she adds that the ladies are keen to talk with such a distinguished gentleman. A far cry from the typically demure female character, resigned to the background in social life, Behn’s creation is notably courageous, happily taking control of her own actions.

This is the first occasion in the story where direct speech occurs, the characters’ words clearly defined with speech marks. Evidently the author wishes to call the reader’s attention to the audacity of this young woman who, taking the initiative, dares to approach this foreign guest. Belvideera displays great ingenuity in her conversation with the gentleman, who is left captivated by the young woman, unable to resist her passion. Belvideera’s confidence begins to wane when she discovers how fluently the Englishman is capable of speaking Italian. Eventually, Belvideera comes to learn that he is in fact a shameless Venetian man.

Meanwhile, another gentleman dressed in a Turkish turban approaches Maria. At the same time, Belvideera tries to conceal her sister’s muteness, stepping in to let the man know that she cannot speak due to the penance imposed upon her by her confessor. Belvideera mocks the young man’s turban and comments on his peculiar accent. He ensures her that “this turbant might have been in the Turkish seraglio, but never in so fair a one as this; [...], I had the happiness to win it from the captain of the Turkish admiral galley” (427-428).

Belvideera speaks English with the handsome guest, demonstrating her impressive education in modern languages. It is worth pointing out here that her linguistic capabilities and her education are exceptional for a young woman of that time; although it was more normal within the highest levels of society. This trait of the protagonist, *inter alia*, clearly suggests a certain degree of self-representation on the part of the writer herself, in terms of the self-teaching of languages and exposing herself to other aspects of culture. The narrator takes it upon herself to explain that the eldest daughter is capable of understanding all the European languages at the age of sixteen, and able to speak in the majority of them. Again this stands as yet another implicit *auctorial* reference, since the writer was also well versed in modern languages.



At this point in which the two gallants find themselves in the company of the young ladies, Belvideera gives a display of her wisdom, firmly declaring: "Sir [...] you must share in his good fortunes, and learn to conquer men, before you have the honour of being subdu'd by Ladies, we scorn mean prizes" (428). The young woman addresses the Venetian, advising him to model his behaviour on the gestures and education of Englishman, even going so far as to point out that women "scorn mean prizes". Once again there is an autobiographical aspect to the scene, as the author directs her sympathies towards her fellow countryman over the Italian man.

The conscience of the young woman who monopolizes the last section of the work is also remarkable, particularly when she makes love to Dangerfield and, immediately afterwards, appears to lament the loss of her honour: "The ruin'd lady now too late deplored the loss of her honour; but he endeavour'd to comfort her by making vows of secrecy, and promising to salve her reputation by a speedy marriage, which he certainly intended, had not the unhappy crisis of his fate been so near" (441). In this way, the author calls attention to the social stigma associated with a woman having sexual relations outside of, or prior to, marriage. Her lover tries to comfort her by proposing that they be married with haste, and this in spite of the knowledge that he must soon depart on his new job as captain, having been awarded the position by the protagonist's father.

Further issues regarding the female sex arise in the last paragraph of the text when Belvideera decides to go into seclusion for the rest of her life. She has, by this time, inherited part of her father's estate which would allow her to survive financially. And yet the sole survivor of the entire family is not destined for a life of society, even if at the cost of great suffering; instead she decides to live in confinement for the rest of her days. We witness the unfortunate ending of a woman who is left an orphan, with no family whatsoever and who would also be marginalized from a society that has discovered the incest committed (albeit unwittingly) by her brother and sister, as well as the deaths of those involved.

An alternative interpretation of the conclusion to the narrative is that offered by Mintz (2), who argues that a woman who overcomes such terrible tribulations is a perfect symbol of rebellion, freedom and the shaking off of the oppressive chains of patriarchal society (Prieto-Pablos 99). Now the woman is free to choose her own destiny, even if her choice must lead her into a life of reclusion and solitude.

## 9. EROTICISM: "FREE FROM THE INCUMBRANCE OF DRESS"

Another area in which Behn gives evidence of her creative abilities is in her descriptions of the female characters. In this particular work, these descriptions go beyond the mere representation of beauty, the author consciously accentuating the erotic aspect of her characters. This factor is also included in other stories, although with less emphasis. It is apparent, for example, in *The History of the Nun*. Todd gives the opinion that "Isabella eroticises the space in such a way that the final effect, like that of *Love-Letters* is sardonic rather than tragic" (Todd 292).



In particular, there are two episodes of a markedly erotic nature. The first takes place when Dangerfield, after fighting with Gonzago and Erizo, is separated from the fight by Rinaldo (who comes out of the church where he had been attending the morning service) and invited to eat at his house. As they walk together, Maria, who has recently woken up, is leaning out to the balcony “and with her night-gown only thrown loose about her” (Behn 432) when Dangerfield looks up and contemplates “such an amazing sight of beauty, made him doubt the reality of the object” (433). “He saw her in all the heightening circumstances of her charms, he saw her in all her native beauties, free from the incumbrance of dress” (433), suggesting this to be a culminating moment in the reader’s perception of this young lady, intensifying as it proceeds from her dress to her half-naked body.

The description takes on a comparative tone and emphasizes several details. The first to be mentioned is her hair, which is said to have particularly positive and sensual qualities: “her hair as black as ebony, hung flowing in careless curls over her shoulders, it hung link’d in amorous twinings, as if in love with its own beauties” (433). Then the focus shifts as her eyes, still drowsy with sleep, are compared to two suns: “her eyes not yet freed from the dullness of the late sleep, cast a languishing pleasure in their aspect, which heaviness of sight added the greatest beauties to those suns” (433). The imagery goes on, incorporating the concepts of brightness and shade. The technique employed is similar in the description of the dress: in this instance it uses the symbol of a veil which cannot hide her great beauty. “because under the shade of such a cloud, their lustre cou’d only be view’d; the lambent drowsiness that play’d upon her face, seem’d like a thin veil not to hide, but to heighten the beauty which it cover’d” (433). Earlier her clothing lovingly grazed her figure, providing a glimpse of the woman’s body; now her eyes and face give evidence of a deeper, inner beauty.

Lastly, the description returns to her night-gown and the eroticism with which it began, referring directly to her breasts: “her night-gown hanging loose, discover’d her charming bosom, which cou’d bear no name, but transport, wonder and extasy, all which struck his soul, as soon as the object hit his eye” (433). The sight has a remarkable effect on the Englishman, as is reflected in the text by three consecutive nouns of a very direct nature: “transport, wonder and extasy”, the connotation of which is modified by the adverbial phrases employed further on, which evoke the dramatic effect that the vision has both on his soul and his eyes. This climax is important because it represents a tipping point in the mind and in the senses of Dangerfield:

her breasts with an easy heaving, show’d the smoothness of her soul and of her skin; their motions were so languishingly soft, that they cou’d not be said to rise and fall, but rather to swell up towards love, the heat of which seem’d to melt them down again; some scatter’d jetty hairs, which hung confus’dly over her breasts, made her bosom show like Venus caught in Vulcan’s net, but ’twas the spectator, not she, was captivated. (433).

The synesthesia of the moment is palpable (“struck his soul”) (433) sending the young man’s senses into disarray. Next, the narrative turns its sharp



focus to the movement of her breasts, revealing not only her skin but her soul as well, awakening the passions of the protagonist at the same time as it engages the interest of the reader. The simile that compares Maria's breasts to those of Venus is important in its attributing divine traits to this dazzling, unattainable and (for the time being) unblemished young lady.

The state of mind of the father's guest is all too clear, as the author describes his reaction, including a rhetorical question to emphasise his extreme rapture: "This Dangerfield saw, and all this at once, and with eyes that were adapted by a preparatory potion; what must then his condition be?" (433). The shock suffered by the protagonist is clearly demonstrated, as he ends up supported in the arms of the young woman's father: "He was stricken with such amazement, that he was forced to support himself, by leaning on Rinaldo's arms, who started at his sudden Indisposition" (433).

Every thought that passes through the Englishman's mind is then revealed in first-person, as a shift is made into direct speech while Dangerfield begs forgiveness from Rinaldo: "Your pardon, sir [...] my indisposition proceeds from an inward malady, not by a sword, but like those made by Achilles's spear, nothing can cure, but what gave the wound" (433-434). The mythological reference to the spear of Achilles only serves to heighten the sense of extreme pain that is the effect of love, impressions which possibly also come directly from the author's own experiences.

As we have noted, the description continues to intensify, until Maria is compared with the Roman goddess of love, beauty and fertility herself. Dangerfield's eventual reaction is to explain his indisposition, which he attributes to love, passion and the beautiful figure that he had just unexpectedly come across. The second erotic episode is more intense than the first, occurring while the characters are at dinner with the senator. Maria has remained in her bedroom at the request of her sister, who takes it upon herself to explain that her sister is unwell. Belvideera clearly wants her rival in love removed from the scene. Earlier, Maria had been shown hiding Dangerfield in her bedroom closet.

While her sister, her father and the other guests (Gonzago and Erizo) are playing cards, the young woman decides to open the closet doors. From this moment on the scene is filled with eroticism, desire and passion. The setting lends itself to the romantic nature of the scene, a fact that is noted by Dangerfield shortly afterwards (440). It is night; the two are alone in a bedroom; Maria believes that her sister will not come up to the room; the guests are enjoying their card games and they both come together after the brief confinement:

at length it grew dark, and Maria [...] innocently took Dangerfield by the hand, to lead him out, he clapt the dear soft hand to his mouth, and kissing it eagerly, it fired his blood, and the unhappy opportunity adding to the temptation, raised him to the highest pitch of passion; [...] he fell down on his knees, devouring her tender hand, sighing out his passion, begging her to crown it with her love, making ten thousand vows and protestations of his secrecy and constancy, urging all the arguments that the subtilty of the devil or can could suggest. (440-441).



It is worth noting that it is Maria who takes the initiative, “innocently” taking Dangerfield’s hand. He, for his part, does not hesitate either, bringing her hand to his mouth and repeatedly kissing it, awakening his own desire and greatly exciting the young woman. The passion and desire of the moment continue to intensify until their two bodies melt into one another. The wordplay evident in the phrase “with her love, making ten thousand vows” (411) offers the reader a subtle hint of the sexual act that is about to take place:

She held out against all his assaults above two hours, and often endeavoured to struggle from him, but durst make no great disturbance, thro’ fear of alarming the company below, at last he redoubling his passion with sighs, tears, and all the rest of love’s artillery, he at last gain’d the fort, and the poor conquered lady, all panting, soft, and trembling every joynt, melted by his embraces, he there fatally enjoy’d the greatest extasy of bliss, heightned by the circumstances of stealth, and difficulty in obtaining. (441).

The author depicts this climactic episode with an erotic lexicon, supported by a language of war and conflict that are particularly apt for this scene. The sense of conquest is reflected in words such as “struggle”, “disturbance”, “peek”, “gain’d the fort” and “conquered lady” (441). Both Behn’s remarkable skill as a writer and her explicitness reach their greatest heights as she vividly describes the image of a panting, languorous woman whose every joint is trembling, weak in the arms of her lover. To further emphasise this, Behn clarifies it by stating that Dangerfield “enjoy’d the greatest extasy of bliss”. The sexual imagery employed will already be well known to those familiar with this writer’s semantic world. We only need refer to the seventh verse of “The Disappointment” – published in 1680 in *Poems on Several Occasions* – in order to demonstrate this:

He saw how at her length she lay;  
He saw her rising bosom bare;  
Her loose, thin robes, through which appear  
A shape designed for love and play;  
Abandoned by her pride and shame.  
She does her softest joys dispense,  
Offering her virgin-innocence  
A victim to love’s sacred flame,  
[...] (*Oroonoko* 225)

In this poem of fourteen stanzas Aphra Behn also employs sexual and erotic language emphasised by terms of conquest (“offering”, “virgin-innocence”, “victim”), and supported by a syntax of parallel structures and a synchronized rhythmic prosody; all crowned by the same sensual language which can also be seen in the text of *The Dumb Virgin* nearly two decades later.





## 10. FEMINITY AS DEFECTIVE: THE FORCE OF IMAGINATION OVER TRAVEL NARRATIVES

The journey to the island on the Adriatic Sea gives rise to a flight of imagination, coupled with a 'feminine' desire to travel and to discover far-off, exotic lands. From a meta-literary point of view, the voyage embodies the style of fantasy stories and even travel narratives. The conclusion is that a combination of desire, the period spent on the island and the journey itself all serve to provoke the exacerbation of the defects inherent in womankind. The tendency towards exoticism and fantasy result in a "literature" that is faulty, full of shortcomings and deficiencies. Behn favours realism over romance literature and fantasy stories.

As we have already mentioned, two particular misfortunes occur in the story. The eldest daughter (Belvideera) is born with physical deformities that are noticeable at first sight, while the younger daughter's defects are not immediately noticeable, only becoming evident when somebody tries to engage her in conversation; Maria is mute. The writer explains the causes of these deformations, stating that "the frights and dismal apprehensions of the mother, at her being taken by the pirates", led to Belvideera's physical defects, while the reason for Maria muteness can be found in "the silence and melancholy of the mother" (Behn 424). In the midst of the tragedy played out in the final scenes when the protagonist witnesses the deaths of both her lover and her father, she miraculously begins to speak again. In this way the author indicates that while the suffering of her mother during pregnancy had been the cause of her inability to speak, now it is the daughter's own suffering which compels her to be able to speak.

In essence, the plot tells the story of a mother who gives birth to children with certain deformities, and who is implicated in the outcome of her pregnancies, these being the mental and physical disabilities in the children (Nussbaum 34). There is evidence of a string of misfortunes befalling the mother, the wife of the Venetian senator, who is presented as the cause of these tragic events. She is portrayed as the instigator of the images of "female voicelessness" and "non-agency" depicted in the story.

One crucial factor is the mother's daring decision to travel by boat, which leads her to great suffering and pain as a result of the disappearance of her son. According to the semantics of the narrative, it is her desire for pleasure and enjoyment in life that eventually leads to the deformations suffered by her daughter Belvideera. In particular, this period of great suffering gives rise to her own spirit of helpless melancholy, leading in turn to her second daughter's inability to speak. Felicity A. Nussbaum (28) states: "In both cases the mother's reproductive power is compromised by immoderate desire, and her womb, the defective appendage, makes manifest her hidden faults to produce a more defective second category of flawed femininity in the second generation". The portrayal of "defective femininity" permeates the misogynist narrative of the period, in which femininity itself is depicted as inherently defective.

As the story progresses, the suffering endured by the characters transcends its purely physical manifestations. It encompasses not only the physical disabilities, but also the suffering and psychological (and social) torment of the young protago-



nist. By succumbing to her desires, her appetite for pleasure, Maria commits an act of incest. When the woman makes a physical reality of her love, giving free rein to her own impulses, she commits a crime far graver than the mere instance of physical deformity or muteness (Mintz 2-12).

The culmination of the narrative makes all too clear the fate that awaits the women of seventeenth-century English society. It was customary at the time for a male figure - personified usually by either the father or brother - to govern and map out the path to be followed by a woman over the course of her life. In this story, incest is the dire consequence of a woman who refused to be led by the counsel of others in terms of her personal affairs. As a result of this daring affront, Naussbaun (*The Limits* 39) points to the instances of deformity and destruction which occur in the story.

This is an example of the fusion of the worlds of literature and reality. Towards the beginning of the seventeenth century a text written by the third Earl of Shaftesbury's appeared entitled *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, in which he proposes that stories of travel are dangerous and even harmful to the mind. He expresses this view in "Soliloquy: or Advice to an Author" (Klein xiii) where he states his disapproval of "high Imagination, florid Desires, and specious Sentiment". On the other hand, Ashley Cooper lamented the participation of women in civil society.

## 11. CONCLUSIONS

The courage and desire to travel to *terra incognita* has its just reward. The wife of the Venetian gentleman loses her son when he disappears. The sadness she feels is considered to be the cause of the deformities of her next child; next, her period of profound melancholy causes the younger daughter to be born mute. They are defects that the writer reflects, as a painter portrays their subject. However, far from subverting the narrative by detracting from the protagonists' beauty and vitality, these are in fact accentuated; the writer stresses the qualities that interest her to such an extent that an unprecedented level of eroticism is achieved in the text. In this sense, Behn clearly did not fear the judgement of her critics (*iudicis argutum quae, non formidat acumen*). As if she were a painter (*ut pictura poesis*), she takes up (de la Calle 87-92) the *dictum* of Simónides (Galí 19) and Horace (112).

Aphra Behn's work deconstructs the reigning status quo with respect to female desire, as well as to the development, involvement and depiction of women in society. She also subverts other deeply-rooted social customs, as the two daughters do not hide from the public eye as might be expected, secluded in the safety of the home as a result of Maria's muteness and Belvideera's physical deformity; instead, they actively pursue a life among high society. These defects do not prevent the young women from pursuing their desires; nor serve to deter their potential suitors. In this way, Behn formulates a wholehearted defence of the right of all women to a social life of their choosing, as she depicts one woman with physical deformities and another who is mute, yet who is still capable of contracting a marriage (Nussbaum 38).

The author carefully controls the times when the names of the characters appear in the text. One example is Rinaldo's wife, whose name does not appear



in the narrative at any point. The technique seems to reflect certain beliefs regarding the shortcomings of being a woman, emphasized here by the deformity of one daughter and the disfigurement of the other. Belvideera is deformed but very intelligent; Maria, a mute, is extremely beautiful. Another example is Dangerfield's first name – Cosmo – which is only revealed at the end.

As if by magic, Maria speaks for the first time when she discovers that her lover is also her brother, as a direct result of the effect that this shocking news has on her. It is interesting that at this exact moment the narrator (who is also a character) loses the ability to speak. This is a case of semantic dexterity whereby the individual tesserae, artfully placed, produce the overall image which Aphra Behn wishes to convey: that of a young girl who is born mute and, as a result of the events played out in the narrative, recovers her voice just as the narrator loses hers upon witnessing said events, as the narrative itself draws to a close.

*The Dumb Virgin; or, The Force of Imagination* deals with two key issues concerning England in the seventeenth century: firstly, the new advances in medical science, demonstrated by the explanations given for the abnormalities of the children and secondly, the role of women in society conveyed by the presence of the protagonists in community life. Both Rinaldo's wife, who boards the ship and travels to the island and her two daughters who attend the finest Venetian social functions, are examples of this. In conclusion, the story interweaves certain issues which are still of great concern to women of contemporary, modern England. Being in the public eye, or feeling a profound sense of loneliness and dejection; participation in society and the resulting social standing, or reclusion and weariness; freedom of choice in marriage and within the marriage, as well as the inherent issues of procreation and pregnancy, among other matters.

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