

“For know, alas, I’m dumb, alas I love”:
Rhetoric of disability, female agency and tragedy in
“The Dumb Virgin”

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ABSTRACT

This essay will focus on the two sisters of “The Dumb Virgin; or, The Force of Imagination,” addressing the crossover between disability studies, feminism and aesthetic theory. It will examine how art has the capacity to manipulate nature and how nature may be improved by the intervention of human industry. With this aesthetic duality, it will suggest that the writer reframes the concept of the ‘normal’ body, establishing a rhetoric of deformity and disability through the characters of Belvideera and Maria, both of whom overcome their natural disabilities by means of personal effort. Lastly, it will investigate the ‘misfortunes’ of several characters, paying particular attention to the educated nature of the two protagonists and how this poses a threat to the established order of society. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that their challenge to the social construct is directly responsible for the tragic climax of the narrative.

KEYWORDS: Aphra Behn; “The Dumb Virgin”; female agency; rhetoric of disability and deformity; Restoration literature.

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RESUMEN: Este trabajo se centra en las dos hermanas de “The Dumb Virgin; or, The Force of Imagination” considerando la intersección entre los estudios de la discapacidad, el feminismo y la teoría estética. Se estudia cómo el arte puede manipular a la naturaleza y cómo la naturaleza puede ser mejorada por la intervención del esfuerzo humano. Con esta dualidad estética se plantea cómo la autora re-conceptualiza la noción de ‘cuerpo normalizado’ mediante la retó-

RESUMO: Este estudo centra-se nas duas irmãs de “The Dumb Virgin; or, The Force of Imagination”, considerando a intersecção entre os estudos da deficiência, feminismo e teoria estética. Examina-se de que forma a arte tem a capacidade para manipular a natureza e de que forma a natureza pode ser melhorada através da intervenção do esforço humano. Com esta dualidade estética, sugere-se que a autora reconceptualiza a noção de “corpo normal”, estabelecendo

* Translation into Portuguese by Miguel Ramalhete.

rica de la deformidad y de la discapacidad en los personajes de Belvideera y María que superan sus disfunciones naturales mediante su esfuerzo. Finalmente, se investigan los ‘infortunios’ de varios personajes destacando a las dos protagonistas como formadas y educadas, como amenazas al orden social establecido. Se concluye que los trágicos finales se derivan del desafío realizado al constructo social.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Aphra Behn; “The Dumb Virgin”; agencia femenina; retórica de la discapacidad y la deformidad; literatura de la restauración.

uma retórica da deformidade e da deficiência através das personagens de Belvideera and Maria, superando ambas as suas deficiências naturais por via de um esforço pessoal. Finalmente, investiga-se os “infortúnios” de várias das personagens, prestando-se atenção em particular à educação das duas protagonistas e de que forma isto representa uma ameaça à ordem estabelecida da sociedade. A conclusão a retirar-se é de que o seu desafio ao construto social é diretamente responsável pelo final trágico da narrativa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Aphra Behn; “The Dumb Virgin”; agência feminina; retórica da deficiência e da deformidade, literatura da Restauração.

A family of ten children will be always called a fine family, where there are heads and arms and legs enough for the number; but the Morlands had little other to the word, for they were in general very plain, and Catherine for many years of her life, as plain as any.

Northanger Abbey (Austen 2006, 5)

1. Introduction

Before Sarah Scott’s construction of a *feminotopia*¹ in *Millenium Hall* (1762) and William Hay’s theories regarding disability in *Deformity. An Essay* (1754), whereby he conceptualizes it as a privileged condition, the author of this short fiction² (published under Aphra Behn’s name) developed a comparable symbolic content that is worthy of further investigation.

¹ The term was coined by Marie-Luise Pratt (1992, 166–68) and used in reference to the work of Sarah Scott by Felicity Nussbaum (1997, 161–73).

² Leah Orr (2013, 30) questions the authorship of “The Dumb Virgin” and other stories traditionally attributed to Behn by specialized critics like O’Donnell (2004b, xxii), Trofimova (2011, 1), etc. These doubts of attribution had already been raised by Janet Todd (1996, 317) in her biography of Behn.

This text considers the notion of femininity as a social construct (Armstrong 1987, 30)³ as well as a fictional structure, in terms of which the behavior of the protagonists of “The Dumb Virgin; or the Force of the Imagination” (1698)⁴ must be properly understood. Within this conceptual framework, the notions of female agency, the rhetoric of deformity and disability studies (Garland-Thomson 2002, 1) become wholly relevant.

This article will investigate how the literary writer demonstrates the ability of art to manipulate nature in compensation for the abnormal bodies of her female heroes (Belvideera and Maria). It discusses how the protagonists are capable of overcoming their natural disabilities by means of their industry and study. It also investigates how the writer subverts the female image and the established idea of the normalized body, making a strong case for greater female agency. This working hypothesis will be developed further addressing the aesthetic argument in the context of the rhetoric of disability and in the connection between deformity studies, feminism and aesthetic theory.

At this point it is worth acknowledging the generic construction of the text, as a romance and as a fiction, since this sheds light on certain elements of the plot. According to Michael McKeon, literature “crystallizes genre-ness [...] self-consciously incorporating it, as part of its form, the problem of its own categorial status” (2017, 67). Although McKeon refers here specifically to the novel, it is arguably equally applicable to this short story. In this respect, there is considerable relevance in the differentiation⁵ established by

³ “The Dumb Virgin” has been subject to little critical analysis, with only few articles devoted exclusively to it (Craft-Fairchild 1993, Robitaille 1997, Nussbaum 2000 and 2003, Bowles 2012). Yao-Hsi (2014) has carried out a general investigation of the defective characters in several works published under the name of Behn. Torralbo-Caballero (2015) revisited questions of gender and examined other aspects such as realism and eroticism in the character of Maria.

⁴ “The Dumb Virgin” was printed—but not published—in 1698 along with “The Unfortunate Bride” and “The Unfortunate Happy Lady.” These works were published in 1700 in *Histories, Novels, and Translations Written by the Most Ingenious Mrs Behn*. It is possible that “all three short stories” were produced “as part of a ‘Second Volume’” (Todd 1995, 326) of *All the Histories and Novels published in 1698* (O’Donnell 2004b, xi–xxii).

⁵ Certain writers of the following century attempted to define and categorize these terms. For instance, in 1742 Henry Fielding defined “a comic Romance” as “a comic Epic-Poem in Prose” in his preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1980, 4). Later, in *The Progress of*

William Congreve in the same period. He clarifies that “Romances are generally composed of the constant loves and invincible courages of heroes, heroines, kings and queens, mortals of the first rank, and so forth, where lofty language, miraculous contingencies and impossible performances elevate and surprise the reader into a giddy delight,” while “Novels are of a more familiar nature: come near us, and represent to us intrigues in practice; delight us with accidents and odd events, but not such as are wholly unusual or unprecedented [...]” (Congreve 2003, 5).

The story contains certain elements that are clearly remnants of the romance tradition—“romance strategies” (Fuchs 2004, 31)—such as the early death of the mother, orphan children, fantasy, hyperbole and sword-play. These elements illuminate the protagonists’ successful attempts to overcome their disabilities. At the same time, however, the story also incorporates aspects that indicate a developing sense of realism, such as specific details relating to location and time. These include references to the Adriatic Sea, Venice, the Ponte di Rialto, and St. Mark’s Basilica, as well as the ten minutes during which Dangerfield is involved in a swordfight. There are also historically relevant references, such as the skirmish between the Venetian and Turkish fleets, and the character of the Turkish merchant. This fusion of elements justifies the view of “The Dumb Virgin” as being a hybrid work in terms of its genre, embodying as it does the transition between a preceding literary period (romance) and the early modern era (fiction, the novel).

2. Master tropes of deformity and disability

The first episode narrated in the text focuses on the mother of the protagonists. It presents a movement from the internal to the external environment, from domesticity towards the public sphere.⁶

Romance Clara Reeve (1785, I,8) presents a comparison between the romance genre and the novel through a dialogue in which one of her characters, Euphrasia, defends the romance, while another—Hortensius—criticizes it. Reeve proposes “to follow its progress [romance’s] through the different periods to its declension, to shew how the modern Novel sprung up out of its ruin, to examine and compare the merits of both, and to remark upon the effects of them” (1785, I,8).

⁶ The act of writing this story on the subject of the interiority of women (i.e. their secrecy) in itself stands as an act of participation in the public sphere. With regard to *Belvideera* and *Maria’s* public presence, of great relevance is the concept introduced

The wife of Senator Rinaldo is presented as “beautiful and virtuous” as well as “disturbed by the following occasion” (341). The verb “disturb” is fundamental: its inclusion in the opening paragraph expresses a disruption of the normal from the outset of the work. At this point, Rinaldo and his wife are happy, and they have a young son; however, the mother (the writer does not reveal her name)⁷ develops a desire to travel to the Adriatic Sea to a place of “benign climate [...] situated exactly between Italy and Greece” that “appears an entire epitome of all the pleasures in them both.” The “glories of the Island” (341) will be the trigger that sets in motion all the subsequent tragic events.

The wife of Rinaldo fails to secure the happiness she desires; during the voyage her ship is attacked by a band of Turkish pirates and her son falls overboard and disappears, presumed to have drowned. In this way, the mother’s decision to follow her own desires leads directly to the loss of her son. In other words, her audacious determination to make a sea voyage simply for pleasure—leaving her home and her country, abandoning her domestic life in Venice (and by extension her home, her family context and her husband)—is the cause for the first great tragedy of the narrative, affecting not only the woman who followed her desires by taking this trip but also her husband, who is equally tormented by the disappearance of their son. Furthermore, the pursuit of female desire on the part of the mother leads to the physical deformities in the children she bears following the tragedy at sea. The courage and desire to travel to *terra incognita* has its “just reward.”

The mother tries to alleviate her suffering by conceiving again; however, this daughter (Belvideera) is born with physical abnormalities. Later, wishing again to ease her profound state of

by Jürgen Habermas and modulated by McKeon, specifically that: “The most visible case in point regarding the inclusiveness of the emergent public sphere is that of women” (2005, 73). The root of the concept can be found in Habermas ([1962] 1989, 36–37). Tita Chico examines the concept of “public display of femininity,” applying it to *The Rover* (2000, 127). See also the study carried out by Martine van Elk (2017, 27–80), particularly the first chapter.

⁷ Rinaldo’s wife, the mother of the protagonists, appears unnamed, anonymously. In contrast, their father is characterized by his name (Rinaldo) and through his political position as a senator in the city of Venice. By depicting the characters in this way, the short fiction author gives great emphasis to the social enhancement of men in contrast to the silence, the neutralization and the marginalization of their female counterparts.

melancholy and sadness, she conceives again, in time giving birth to another daughter (Maria) who is born dumb. The mother dies in childbirth. A mechanism of cause and effect is established here, illustrating the intentions of the author. Belvideera is born with a “deformity” (344) described with her “limbs [...] distorted,” her “back bent, and tho the face was the freest from deformity, yet had it no beauty to recompence the dis-symmetry of the other parts” (344). Maria, the other protagonist, is born with a “defect” (344), described as “the most beautiful Daughter [...] but naturally and unfortunately dumb” (344).

These two core thematic concepts reflect two master tropes: one of deformity, the other of disability, which stand in opposition to the rhetoric of sameness. The author’s treatment of disability by means of not one, but two disabled heroines is innovative and unprecedented in English literature. The gendered embodiments of the protagonists are not merely formulations of non-normalized bodies (Mintz 2006, 2–5). The depiction of Maria (muteness) reflects an “extreme preference for female docility and silence” (Bowles 2012, 8). Similarly, the depiction of Belvideera (physical disfigurement) emphasizes deformity, anatomical malformation and the idea of the ill-shaped body, contrasting with the idealized expectation that women should be beautiful and graceful. Belvideera and Maria communicate perfectly. The two sisters are complementary since they “are presented as two parts that together make a whole” (Bowles 2012, 7), a fact that is expressed by the narrator as follows: “his [Dangerfield’s] love was divided between the beauty of one Lady, and wit of another, either of which he loved passionately, yet nothing cou’d satisfy him, but the possibility of enjoying both” (349).

Felicity Nussbaum states that “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” (2003, 28). The portrayal of defective femininity permeates the misogynist narrative of the period, in which femininity itself is depicted as inherently defective, a perspective challenged by this writer.

It may be concluded that “The Dumb Virgin” reveals a belief in the idea of swift punishment as just reward for a person’s behavior.

The conception of individual misdeeds carrying a harsh punishment for the perpetrator and putting others close to them at risk follows the long-standing belief that condemned deformity as being an instance of divine wrath. This view was posited by thinkers such as Francis Bacon⁸ in 1612, Thomas Pope Blount⁹ in 1697 and Samuel Johnson in 1755. In this particular story the disabilities of the children are given as evidence of the mother's "sins."¹⁰

3. The aesthetic duality of art and nature

The two sisters are employed by the author to represent a key aesthetic duality. The work establishes a clear distinction between nature and art from the beginning when it defines the island in the Adriatic Sea as "a place wonderfully pleasant in the Summer, where art and nature seem to out-rival each other, or seem rather to combine in rendring the most pleasant of their products" (341). This allusion confirms the knowledge of this dichotomy on the part of the writer. The equality and complementarity that the narrator raises is further modified when it is indicated that Rinaldo intends to compensate for "the defaults of Nature by the industry of Art" (344). In the European society of Venice where the protagonists are born, there is no balance between nature and art, since Belvideera is deformed and Maria is disabled. For this reason, the father gives power to human intervention (*ars*) in an attempt to remedy the imperfections caused by nature.

⁸ Francis Bacon, in "Of Deformity" (1612), establishes that "Ubi peccat in uno, periclitatur in altero" (2012, 426). Hay's publication, which follows the same format seen in "Of Deformity," challenged the message of Bacon's essay. Hay pointed out that "far from exhibiting the anti-social personality traits described by Bacon, the deformed person contributes materially to the physical, moral, and spiritual improvement of society [...]" (James-Cavan 2005, 28).

⁹ Pope Blount ([1692] 1967, 99) affirms that "a received Opinion among the ancients that Outward Beauty, was an infallible Argument of inward Beauty; and so on the contrary, That a deformed Body was a true Index of a deformed Mind, or an ill Nature."

¹⁰ Samuel Johnson, in his *Life of Pope* (1781), justified the physical deformities of the poet Alexander Pope as being due to his behavior: "he was of a constitution originally feeble and weak, and as bodies of a tender frame are easily distorted his deformity was probably in part the effect of his application" (1984, 725). In his dictionary, Johnson (1755) defines "deformity" as "Ridiculousness" and "the quality of something worthy to be laughed at."

Rinaldo declares his intentions, echoing those of the female writer, whose *exercitatio* (“industry of Art”) appeared within a literary spectrum monopolized by male voices and in a society that fostered “constructions of femininity as deformity” (Nussbaum 2003, 24). The tools that their father applies are “the greatest provision for their breeding and education” (344), whose effect was immediately visible, resulting in prodigious progress and a remarkable degree of compensation for the disabilities suffered by the two daughters. Belvideera learns to speak “all the European Languages” (344), achieving the same profundity of knowledge and skill in her mental capacities and linguistic fluidity; as Maria grows she becomes increasingly beautiful, while “the language of her Eyes sufficiently paid the loss of her Tongue” (345).

The author reframes the classic arguments about *natura* and *ars*, reflecting her understanding of this crucial Renaissance-era diatribe tackled by Sir Philip Sidney¹¹ and Shakespeare¹² among others. Half a century later, the critic Samuel Johnson alluded to the manipulation of nature by art when he used the simile of the diamond in these terms: “as a diamond [...] may be polished by art, and placed in such situation, as to display that lustre which before was buried among common stones” (2008, 176).¹³

There is a connection between this aesthetic duality and the rhetoric of disability. The writer demonstrates how nature can be manipulated through the industry of art. Other authors argued that nature is capable of being “methodized.” John Dryden stated that “the knowledge of Nature was the original rule, and all poets ought to study her [...] that those things which delight all ages must have been an imitation of Nature” ([1677] 2006, 2130). Similarly, Alexander Pope declared “Those Rules of old discovered, not devised | Are Nature still, but Nature Methodiz’d” showing that “Nature and Homer were [...] the same” ([1711] 2008, 3–5). This idea was also expressed by Congreve in *Incognita*, where he establishes

¹¹ Sidney affirms that “there is no art delivered to mankind that hath not the works of Nature for his principal object” (2002, 84).

¹² A similar opinion is voiced by Polixenes in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* when he claims that “Nature is made better by no mean | But Nature makes that mean: so, over that art, | Which you say adds to Nature, is an art | That Nature makes” (4.3.88–91). In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare confirmed that art holds “a mirror up to nature” (3.2.23).

¹³ Originally published in *The Rambler*, on 20th March 1750.

that “Nature had been partial in bestowing on some better faces than others, Art was alike indulgent to all, and industriously supplied those defects she had left, giving some addition also to her greatest excellencies” (2003, 15). We may conclude that the well-established aesthetic theory that the author applies—favoring art over nature—is present also in the work of certain writers of the Restoration period and the eighteenth century.

The “maker” was aware of the theoretical tradition summarized in the concept of *ut pictura poesis*,¹⁴ as evident in other works such as *Oroonoko; or the Royal Slave*, in the dedicatory letter of which the author draws a comparison between the poet and the painter, suggesting that “A poet is a painter in his way” (Behn 1997, 5). This serves to indicate that the content of a literary work should be a reflection of real life, an understanding similar to that presented by Samuel Johnson in the aforementioned reference. Comparing both types of creativity, Behn indicates that “the Pictures of the Pen shall out-last those of the Pencil” (1997, 6), confirming the writer’s belief in the ability of literature to survive the passing of the centuries. The following section will examine an episode whose aesthetic background reflects this theoretical relationship.

4. Female agency

The rhetoric of disability, so central to the text as a whole, points to the concept of the gendered female by presenting Belvideera and Maria as a synecdoche. Maria’s inability to speak is a metaphor for “the lack of social power accorded to women” (Pearson 2004, 200). According to Emily Bowles, “Behn crafts these narratives to amplify the corporeal practices to create femininity and thus draw attention

¹⁴ The concept was established by Julius Caesar Simonides (5th century BC) through the idea that “painting is silent poetry, poetry eloquent painting.” This declaration was written by Plutarch (1878, 1.50) in his *Morals in these terms*: “we first describe poetry [...] and tell [...] that it is an imitating art and doth in many respects correspond to painting; not only acquainting him with that common saying, that poetry is vocal painting and painting silent poetry,” and “Though indeed Simonides calls painting silent poetry, and poetry speaking painting” (Plutarch 1878, V, 402). This also calls to mind Scaliger’s understanding of poetry, who echoed Horace’s perspective (*The Art of Poetry. An Epistle to the Pisos*, line 361), particularly concerning the topic of imitation. Similarly to Behn, Sidney had already determined poetry to be “a speaking picture” (2002, 86).

to the ways in which femininity and femaleness are always already marked as defective” (2012, 2). The work develops a trope of female agency on various levels, both on aesthetic and creative terms as well as in the public and social spheres.¹⁵

Maria, the mute, is described as having the greatest skills and abilities in painting. When her father employs a renowned Italian artist to paint her portrait, after trying several times he gives up, unable to reproduce the brilliance of her gaze. The narrator details how, in response to the “weakness of the Painter,” Maria “took up his Pencils and the Picture, and sitting down to her glass finished it her self” (345). This episode is an explicit example of female self-representation, both figuratively and in a literal sense. The writer employs the powerful image of painting to reflect how the protagonist, incapable of speech, is nonetheless capable of applying her own unique set of skills and in so doing far surpasses the comparably poor attempts of a professional male artist.

Through this episode, the author points to several key principles. Firstly, she establishes that by the simple fact of being a woman, Maria is not incapable of creating a near-perfect work of art; in fact the painting she produces is far better than the attempts made by the professional painter her father had hired. Secondly, the writer makes a case for female activity as opposed to passivity. Maria embodies the idea of female-authored behavior, whose function is to break up and change the paradigm of femininity within the established cultural framework. The angelic young woman attains perfection through her skill with the brush. This passage is evidence of the prolificacy of Maria within the narrative as well as the prolificacy of the author as a writer, the works of the pen being comparable to works of art according to the author’s aesthetic understanding discussed earlier.

The episode takes place at an internal level, within a domestic environment. However, the second episode that conveys female agency occurs externally to the domestic setting; specifically, at a

¹⁵ The case of Celesia in “The Unfortunate Bride” is comparable, since it also tells the story of a blind heroine. Celesia’s blindness also subverts normality and yet is portrayed as being somewhat beneficial. Her blindness is compensated by her ability to act as a guide to the protagonists, due to her mental and premonitory capacities, which surpass the physical sight of others, “for she saw clearly in her mind” (Behn 1995, 327).

public celebration. Both Belvideera and Maria attract the attention of eligible gentlemen whom they meet at the ball they both attend. The novelistic employment of masquerade contains a heightened narrative potential that threatens patriarchal structures (Castle 1986, 4; Seager 2012, 79). The act of attending a masked ball is significant because it is another example of the author's depiction of active female behavior. This deduction should be considered with an emphasis on the fact that the protagonists do not represent the "normalized body."

The symbolic force of the appearance of the two disabled sisters in the middle of a social occasion is further emphasized in light of Congreve's account of a social event: "Everybody appeared well shaped, as it is to be supposed; none who were conscious to themselves of any visible deformity would presume to come thither." Congreve (2003, 15) in *Incognita* is describing a courtly masked ball, which also took place in Italy: notably, he directly excludes anyone with any kind of visible deformity. So, if anyone "conscious [...] of any visible deformity would presume" not to go to the celebration, following this stereotypical belief Maria and Belvideera should not have attended the ball. This highlights the boldness and the courage of the women in the story.

This episode calls into question the gendered roles to be assumed in a "Ball" and "Masquerade." In this context, Belvideera conceals her defects by disguising herself in men's clothes.¹⁶ A young Italian man quickly falls for Belvideera. When the protagonist speaks with the Courtier, he praises her sweet voice and "was entirely captivated with her wit" (346). The second remarkable occurrence is that another young man approaches Maria but, before he attempts to engage her in conversation, her sister Belvideera interrupts him, saying that Maria has taken a penance to remain silent. At this the young gallant responds "whoever impos'd silence on these fair lips, is guilty of a greater offense" (347).

Interestingly, it is Belvideera, aware of the social exclusion suffered by people with differing capacities, who takes it upon

¹⁶ It is worth clarifying here that the appeal of the "masked ball" is that it allows characters to appear anonymized (Seager 2012, 788), their identities protected by their costumes. In this way, there is a degree of blurring or subversion of the traditional, ideological distinction of gender and class (Castle 1986, 55).

herself to justify and conceal her sister's muteness from the young man. With regard to Maria's situation, the narrator's phrase "she agreed by paying the Price of her liberty" (347) is particularly revealing. In the ensuing conversation, one of Belvideera's responses is also very illuminating. She comments to the young Venetian on "the honor of being subdued by Ladies, we scorn mean praises" (347). With this phrase, the deformed protagonist represents women at the very pinnacle of the social hierarchy. The rigid demarcations of "the social contract" and "the sexual contract" (Armstrong 1987, 30) are being destabilized through the ideas presented by Belvideera. Through her fictional construct, the writer is challenging the social construct.

Another illustration of female heroism occurs in the protagonists' house. The young man visits the house at the invitation of Rinaldo, who is unexpectedly called away to the Senate. Dangerfield encounters Maria in the library, where Rinaldo tells him to entertain himself until he returns. In this scene, the two declare their love for each other and Maria, tormented by her inability to speak, decides to express herself through two brief lines of writing. Rinaldo declares: "I love you Madam to that degree, that if you leave me in a distrust of your anger, I cannot survive; I beg, intreat, conjure you speak, your silence torments me worse than your reproaches cou'd." Maria "moving towards a Writing Desk [...] took Pen and Paper, writ two lines" (353). The way in which the protagonist delivers her confession to her beloved is significant since she hands him the folded paper and retreats quickly from the room in shame ("flinging from him ran up to her chamber").¹⁷ Her text reads: "You can't my pardon, nor my anger move. | For know, alas, I'm dumb, alas I love" (353). This episode presents two important ideas; firstly, the declaration of love on the part of the young woman and secondly, the revelation of her disability. Dangerfield's reaction is also significant in the forcefulness of his response and for the aesthetic

¹⁷ The library setting ("a fine Library") (351-42) and Maria's writing are highlighted here as two key symbols in the text as a whole. The first is initially presented as a place of education and study for the young women, which her father has used to educate his daughters. The second presents the categorization of women as cultured and capable of writing and communicating with others outside the domestic sphere; capable of making decisions in matters of love, thereby suggesting a new conception of gender and new roles for women within society. Once again, the force of this image is enhanced by the protagonist being dumb.

concept that it contains: “Dumb [...] naturally Dumb? O ye niggard powers, why was such a wondrous piece of Art left imperfect?” (353–54) once again explicitly pointing to the ideas of nature and art.

5. Female possibility as a new conception of disability

Femininity as a social construct is destabilized and subverted by the loyalty shown by the author’s female protagonist to her own principles and the dictates of her own heart. Some critics have argued that this fiction “celebrates female virtues” (Pearson 1988, 150). Maria, Belvideera and their mother are the embodiment of female rebellion, a protest against female passivity. The way in which this is ultimately achieved is by choosing to represent themselves in society and by following their own desires rather than conforming blindly to the rigid rules that constrict femininity. In order to ensure the realization of their goals they must “transgress” the rigid and deeply rooted social conceptions of gender.

The examples given are textual representations of the protagonists’ self-realization, which present a new understanding of deformity and disability. This understanding allows for a categorization of deformity as an active condition, and one in which individuals are capable of novel and constructive behavior. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has put it, “feminist disability studies question the dominant premises that cast disability as a bodily problem to be addressed by normalization procedures rather than a socially constructed identity” (2005, 159).

Within this paradigm, we may conclude that the tale presents the idea of “nonstandard bodies” as something beneficial, as a “transformity newness” (Garland-Thomson 2010, 201), as a “variability” (Mounsey 2014, 17), a viewpoint supported by Hay (2004, 24), who declared that “Bodily Deformity is visible to every Eye; but the Effects of it are known to very few.” In this narrative, the effects are represented by female potential and agency. It may be concluded that the author of the tale stands as a forerunner in this field of literature, which displays physical deformities as powerful gifts or protean capabilities.

“The Dumb Virgin” deconstructs the established *status quo* with respect to female desire, as well as with regard to the development,

involvement and depiction of women in society. It also subverts other deeply-rooted social customs, since 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, the writer formulates a wholehearted defense 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 are still capable of contracting a marriage (Nussbaum 2000, 38). Female agency requires a courageous woman to attack the established social reality; nonetheless, the pursuit of her personal ambitions ends in tragedy.

6. Tragic ends: Maria's suicide and Belvideera's reclusion

Towards the end of the story several crimes are committed which are the first stages leading to the tragic conclusion. Dangerfield is murdered by a suitor of Belvideera called Gonzago. In his final moments, Dangerfield accidentally kills Rinaldo, while attempting to kill another character called Erizo.¹⁸ Finally, Maria takes her own life. The fact that these deaths occur in such quick succession is striking, and undoubtedly has a resounding impact on the reader. The circumstances surrounding Maria's suicide are deeply macabre; her death is preceded by a vision of the male protagonists, minutes from death, lying on the ground in a pool of their own blood.

¹⁸ Particularly remarkable is the parallel that can be seen between this scene defined by the narrator as "fatal error" (358) and other works that were printed but not published in 1698. The same climax also appears in "The Unfortunate Bride" when Wildvill resolves to kill Frankwit but kills Belvira by mistake, "missing his Bride." The narrator defines it as a "fatal misunderstanding" (Behn 1995, 334). In "The Unhappy Mistake," Lewis Constance cries "O bloody Mistake!" (Behn 1995, 423) when Miles Hardyman deals him a fatal blow, having mistakenly taken him to be a rival for the love of Diana Constance. In *Oroonoko*, when the protagonist kills his wife Imoinda and is discovered by the group of forty people who are searching for him, they cry out: "Oh, monster! that hast murder'd thy Wife" (Behn 1997, 62). In this case, Imoinda's murder is not carried out in error but consciously and intentionally committed. There is no confusion or misunderstanding, which sets it apart from the aforementioned scenes. Nevertheless, there are noticeable parallels in terms of the murder itself and in the reaction of the group of onlookers.

Another pivotal moment occurs when Rinaldo, also lying fatally wounded on the ground, notices a birthmark on Dangerfield's neck and realizes that he must actually be his son (originally named Cosmo) who was believed to have drowned in the Adriatic Sea whilst travelling with his mother. The tragic nature of the situation is expressed by the long-lost son and lover of his sister when he cries out "O ye impartial powers [...] why did you not reveal this before? Or why not always conceal? How happy had been the discovery some few hours ago, and how tragical is it now?" (358–59).

Maria loses her father, her lover and her honor, "all at once" (358). The punishment she receives is colossal and is illustrated in a contrasting manner. The pleasure that the protagonist had previously enjoyed when making love with Dangerfield, described as "the greatest extasy of bliss" (357), has now become the direst tragedy. Belvideera describes the events as an "unfortunate history" (358). Maria, on the other hand, is overcome with suffering and "by a violent impulse broke the ligament that doubled in her Tongue, and she burst out with this exclamation: Oh! Incest, Incest" (359). Dangerfield echoes Maria's cries with "O! horror, horror, I have enjoyed my Sister, and murdered my Father" (359). Following this, the protagonist "plung'd it [Dangerfield's sword] into her Heart" (359). It is significant that Maria recovers from her disability in this dramatic moment and that she does in fact die with a fully functional, normalized body. Maria took great pleasure and satisfaction from life while she was dumb, but at the point when her disability disappears, her life becomes a tragedy. Maria loses her inability to speak after witnessing the fatal events occurring between her father and her lover, and upon realizing that she has committed an act of incest with her brother. It follows that Maria begins to speak as a result¹⁹ of the extreme trauma she suffers (the "violent impulse").

Belvideera's story also ends on a mournful note, as she decides "to maintain her a Recluse all the rest of her life" (360). The other protagonist condemns herself to reclusion, to a life of suffering and solitude within a melancholic domesticity and the interior world of the home. The conclusion to be drawn is that Maria commits suicide

¹⁹ The same cause and effect can be seen in "The Unfortunate Bride" when Ceesia recovers her vision after witnessing the tragic death of her cousin (Behn 1995, 334).

and Belvideera becomes a recluse for the rest of her life; one sister takes her own life, the other retreats from life. At this point, they truly are the ones to decide their future. The protagonists choose to remove themselves from the social sphere, knowing their misfortune and the disastrous results of their female desirability and their unconventional behavior.

Analyzed in its entirety, it is possible to see how punishment is meted out to women both at the beginning and at the end of the story. According to the semantic argument that we have been following, these are punishments inflicted upon women who have broken free from the established social order, leaving the domestic sphere behind them and abandoning their position of marginality. First, the mother's punishment was the loss of her son Cosmo, followed by the deformity and the disability of her two daughters as well as her own death during childbirth. Subsequently, the punishment of the two daughters becomes evident. The punishment of the dumb sister who participates in social life (the masked ball, pleasure, ecstasy, Bliss) is death. The punishment of the deformed sister who also attempts to pursue her own desires is loneliness and seclusion.

The end of the text presents a tropic notion of female displacement. The two women withdraw from society, one through suicide, the other by self-imposed seclusion. This elimination is enforced by themselves because they are aware of the ostracism and the stigma that they would certainly suffer were they to remain, having "invaded" the territory of the male and of virtuous women of quality, being themselves "distorted" and "dumb." Belvideera chooses a life of total isolation; the stigma suffered by her sister would be far greater, since she also committed incest with her brother, albeit unknowingly. Therefore, Maria chooses death, and takes her own life.

The tragic aspect of the story which counterbalances the narrative cannot be ignored. Maria (whose courage and ability are comparable to those of her mother) is the embodiment of the educated woman, and as such, she represents a direct threat to the established order. For this reason, the story is bound to come to a bleak conclusion; in this particular short fiction the woman who poses a menace to patriarchal society meets with a tragic, untimely death. Whatever is

monstrous must be destroyed: and so, both the mother and daughters either die or end tragically.

Tragedy dominates the story's conclusion; such a bleak ending may well be interpreted as a morally justified result, deconstructing as it does the foundations established by the narrator over the course of the narrative, while simultaneously obliterating the positive impact of this mute, albeit eloquent, woman. This is the damning result of female expression in society (Craft-Fairchild 1993, 34). On the one hand, the young woman's education and *exercitatio* is consolidated; ultimately, however, the interference of Dangerfield, a symbol of masculine energy, makes it impossible for this model of female self-determination to survive. The protagonist's tragic and untimely death is inevitable. From the point of view of the patriarchal establishment, the existence of a woman capable of overcoming the natural limitations imposed upon her is such a grave threat to the *status quo* that it becomes necessary to destroy her. Nature abhors what is monstrous; as an educated woman, she is therefore just such a monstrosity, and for this, she must die.²⁰

7. The role of the narrator

The role of the narrator deserves further attention in terms of the diverse forms in which is manifested within the story. At various times, the narrator takes the form of a character in her own right, as an eyewitness to key occurrences and as a writer who recounts the story in her own words. Firstly, it is worth noting that it is a female who narrates the story of Maria and Belvideera, a fact which stands in direct opposition to the hegemonically masculine literary discourse of the period. The narrator explains the deformity of the two female protagonists, pointing out the mother's culpability in this respect (following contemporary lines of thought): "which attributed to the learn'd the silence and melancholy of the Mother, as the deformity of the other was the extravagance of her frights" (344).

²⁰ Ardelia, in "The Nun: or, The Perjur'd Beauty," fights her confinement in the Monastery, against her father's will. She tries to remain true to her feelings, to her liberty and her freedom. A parallel can also be drawn between the climax of the two stories, since they both end in tragedy, with the death of the protagonist. Ardelia is subsequently referred to as "the late Fallen Angel" (Behn 1995, 311).

The narrator appears within the fictional landscape alongside the protagonists: “Belvideera [...] was particularly pleas’d with the English which gave me the happiness of many hours of conversation with her” (344), confirming how she would regularly engage Belvideera in conversation in English, as well as being a witness to other events within the narrative. Speaking of Maria, the narrator reveals: “I remember this Lady was the first I saw use the significative way of discourse of the Fingers” (345). In this way, the narrator gives a direct, first-hand account of the details of the plot, which gives a sense of verisimilitude to the content of the story. She reappears towards the end of the narrative²¹ as a secondary character,²² a writer living close to Rinaldo’s family—“lodged within three doors of Rinaldo’s House” (359), awakened by the cries of the neighborhood following the violence that erupts between Dangerfield, Rinaldo, Erizo and Gonzago. In his last moments, Dangerfield asks the female author to refer to his story by the term “Misfortunes” rather than “Crimes.” In so doing, the male protagonist emphasizes the accidental nature of his “fate,” ignoring the sense of wrongful action or punishment implied by the noun “crimes.” The writer wishes to have “done him the Justice [...] to make him be pity’d for his misfortunes, not hated for his crimes” (359–60). The literary “maker” seeks to draw out the reader’s compassion and to encourage them see these horrific consequences as an inevitable outcome.

The narrator describes herself as a writer in another passage in which she declares regarding one of the protagonist’s names:²³

²¹ This is an example of a homodiegetic narrator (Genette 1972, 252) in the sense that she is in some way involved in the events being recounted (Abbott 2002, 64), lending them an *imago veritatis*.

²² Backscheider (2000, 13) points to the authorial strategy (followed by Barker and Manley) of inserting their voice and certain autobiographical elements into their own works, concluding, “I see this characteristic as a deliberate strategy and an important, evolutionary step in the history of the English novel.” Figueroa-Dorrego argues that this interference ensures the credibility, veracity and interest of the events narrated and concludes, “at no point are they capable of altering events to avoid the final tragedy” (1999, 49).

²³ In *Oroonoko* the narrator has a similarly multi-faceted role within the story (the female narrator is an eyewitness to specific events, as well as being a character within the narrative and the writer of the tale itself). A notably similar device occurs when the narrator confirms that one of the characters she meets over the course of the narrative appears in another of her comedies: “We met on the River with Colonel

“Dangerfield, which was a name that so pleas’d me, that [...], I us’d it in a Comedy of mine” (348). She also reveals her nationality to be English at other points in the narrative, such as when she refers to a young Englishman as “my countryman” (345) and later by saying: “I began to mistrust my Englishman” (346). In this way, the distinction between “subject” and “subjected” becomes clear. Ros Ballaster has established the dual functions of the narrator who “represented simultaneously subject (the female writer) and subjected (the female character) within the social order, [as] a register of confusion, as well as an attempt to resolve it” (1993, 189). Nussbaum points out that “the narrator, herself a playwright, ‘struck dumb by the horror of such woeful object’ is herself made speechless when the heroine’s tongue is loosened” (2003, 29). This anomaly complicates the otherwise neat relation between femininity and disability identified within the tale.

The narrator’s initial appearance as a character creates a contrast between her “ableism” and the “nonstandardness” of Belvideera and Maria, although the last time she features directly in the narrative as a character she suffers a disability similar to that experienced by the female protagonists (*ars*). Nevertheless, the narrator undoubtedly personifies the idea of “sameness” or “ableism” in contrast to the deformity and disability of Belvideera and Maria.

In this way, the narrator alone (in contrast with Belvideera, Maria and their unnamed mother) is not directly associated with disability and deformity. However, as a character the narrator suffers disabling and paralyzing effects upon witnessing “the pathetic murder scene” (Nussbaum 2003, 32) at the climax of the story. The narrator factors into the dual concepts of *natura* and *ars*. The narrator, as an individual possessing *ingenium* (*natura*) inhabits a normalized body; however, when she features as a character in her own creation (*ars*), intervening directly in the social environment she has created, she becomes disabled precisely when she witnesses the

Martin [...], and whom I have celebrated in a Character of my New Comedy, by his own Name, in memory of so brave a Man” (Behn 1997, 57–58). This character, Martin, appears later as the protagonist of *The Young Brother, or The Amorous Jilt*. However, it must be noted that the character of Dangerfield does not appear in any other of Behn’s works. Todd suggests “she may be referring obliquely to *The Rover* which was based on Thomas Killigrew’s *Thomaso, The Wanderer* since Dangerfield supposedly called himself Tomazo when he wrote his picaresque narrative of his adventures across England and Europe (*Don Tomazo*, published in 1680)” (1995, 464).

tragic climax of her protagonists' story. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the four female participants in the narrative (Belvideera, Maria, their mother and the narrator-character) all end tragically.

And yet despite this, it is to be inferred that the female presence in the story represents a defense of femininity; the characters themselves, as protagonists, uphold the notion of the free expression of female nature. At the same time, this female presence faithfully reflects contemporary reality, in that the tragic ends of the protagonists symbolize the consequences of active female engagement in the public sphere. The narrator-character's final appearance and her transition from normality to disability corroborate this theory that any woman who attempts to participate in social life either becomes marginalized or is eliminated entirely from society. The fact that the narrator is a woman represents a further defense of femininity, being an implicit proclamation for female literature and the status of the female writer. The indication is that while social parameters may restrict or silence women as actors within the social sphere, women writers—and their literary creations—persist and survive through the creative discourse that they develop.

8. Conclusions

From the outset, the concept of femininity is presented as deformed or disabled. The mother's unconventional behavior leads to her conceiving two children who are both in some way deformed. In order to achieve her purpose—one of social criticism and defense of the female—this master trope of deformity and disability should be understood as a synecdoche for femininity, both in terms of its representation and in the vindication of a greater female agency that is evident in the narrative. The anomalous female behavior portrayed by the narrator-character confronts the prevailing concept of female nature, insofar as the behavior of Maria and Belvideera is utterly subversive of it. Within this understanding, abnormality of any sort (here taking the form of dumbness and "dys-yymmetry" [344]) should not threaten to destabilize the social order. Maria and Belvideera should remain passive, thereby preserving the purity of female perception within society. Yet it is precisely their attempts to

work against nature that leads to the shifting of these natural conditions, through behavior that defies established customs and social convention. These “individual bodies” choose to defy societal and cultural *mores*.

It may be concluded that the writer favors *ars* over *natura* and makes the case for nature improved by art and rules. The author’s “industry” (“industry of Art”) is a precursor to Congreve’s “indulgence” (“Art was alike indulgent [...] and industriously supplied those defects”) and also anticipates Pope’s “method” (“Nature Methodiz’d”). In “The Dumb Virgin,” this *methodus* (*μέθοδος*, which etymologically suggests the idea of a path to be followed) means study, education and artifice as a means of surpassing natural disabilities. This literary text, besides being a fiction, is a discourse on the theory of literature.

By means of these strategies, the author intends to cause a shift in femininity mythologies. Breaking the normalized and stereotypical rules challenges the comfortable classifications of gender and morality. Female agency presents a new conception of deformity, one that is viewed as being less defective and more beneficial. Consequently, the perception of disfigurement that the writer develops reflects an epistemological journey over the course of the eighteenth century from defective disfigurement to beneficial deformity.

Nevertheless, the challenge to the social construct must end in tragedy. Maria commits suicide, and hers is not the only death resulting from her actions. The sisters’ attempts to realize a form of female heroism end in a monstrosity of incest and violence. All the women of the story come to a tragic end, indicating that the employment of female potential and desirability motivated by female agency can only end in utter misery. This may be seen to reflect an understanding of female and gendered agency as monstrous and abnormal. Similarly, a body such as that of Belvideera, which is born deformed, must remain on the margins of society, confined to the interior world of the home, within the domestic sphere. Her attempt to break out into the outside world causes several important changes. It allows Belvideera and Maria to implement their own will and to fall in love. Essentially, it allows them to become active participants within society. This courage has a

destabilizing effect on the established order; their expression of female courage threatens the cultural construct of femininity.

The text becomes a reflection of social conventions and a microcosm of the case for a new conceptualization of femininity. Written some decades before the publication of *Millenium Hall*, “The Dumb Virgin” shares certain motivations with Hay. The tale of Maria and Belvideera had already created a feminized universe, proposing an active role for women within society and challenging or subverting the dominant patriarchal ideology and its concomitant gender inequality. Critical interest in “The Dumb Virgin” arises from its depiction of two disabled female protagonists and how the author uses their representation to argue for both a greater female agency and a reframing of the concept of the “normalized” body. The writer’s originality and courage in showing how nature can be manipulated through art is a fundamental aspect of this “novel” (335). The “maker” promoted art and *exercitatio* over nature; at the same time her writing postulates a new conception of gendered femininity.

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