



# Feminine Identity or Self-Identity in Aphra Behn's The History of Nun : or the Fair Vow-Breaker

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## Feminine Identity or Self-Identity in Aphra Behn's *The History of the Nun: or the Fair Vow-Breaker*

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### 1

Aphra Behn might think that a heroine of the novel should be exceedingly superior not only in beauty but also in wit. Only a woman gifted with both beauty and wit is qualified to be a heroine of her novels. Although such a characterization seems to be more suitable for the romance than the novel, Aphra Behn regards this qualification as essential for a heroine of the novel which unfolds in the male-dominated society, or the hierarchical society. In this hierarchical society man has power over woman; father over children, and husband over wife. While man has a means to get along in the world from birth only because of being born as man, woman has no means only because of being born as woman. Woman has to carry some weapon in order to be on equal terms with man, the privileged. It is beauty and wit that remedy injustice and unfairness toward woman. Aphra Behn looks upon beauty and wit as the weapon to cope with man, and the weapon as competent and satisfactory. Heroines of her novels are the vehicle of this idea. Isabella, the heroine in *The History of the Nun: or the Fair Vow-Breaker*, is no exception. Like other heroines of Behn's novels, she is depicted as perfect. We are told that she is

pretty tall of Statue, with the finest Shape that Fancy can create, with all the Adornment of a perfect brown-hair'd Beauty, Eyes black and lovely, Complexion fair; to a Miracle, all her Features of the

rarest proportion, the Mouth red, the Teeth white, and a thousand Graces in her Meen and Air; she came no sooner abroad, but she had a thousand Persons sighing for love over her; the Reputation of her Wit had acquir'd, got her adorers without seeing her: but when they saw her, they found themselves conquer'd and undone. . . .<sup>1</sup>

We can say the presentation of Isabella may be too exaggerated and conventionalized to invest her with reality, but Aphra Behn dares to take the risk that she may lose the probability of her heroine. That is true of other heroines of her novels. She thinks it necessary so much to give her heroines the weapon of beauty and wit. It is easy for us to criticize Behn the novelist for her exaggerated characterization, but we have to consider the logic of her characterization.

Given the weapon of beauty and wit like other heroines of Behn's novels, Isabella comes to count on it in the escape out of the nunnery, the runaway marriage and the second marriage, which is in fact bigamy. Here we must notice that the weapon does not constitute her feminine identity nor her self-identity. It is not but her means to pursue her identity. The characterization of ideal Isabella does not come from the romance but the novel that illustrates individuals' identities in society. Ideally characterized Isabella comes to know her identity finally through happiness and unhappiness brought by the weapon. In this respect Isabella differs crucially from Imoinda in *Oroonoko*, Atlante in *The Lucky Mistake* and especially Miranda in *The Fair Jilt*. Miranda, who is perfectly endowed with beauty and wit and is brought up in a nunnery as well as Isabella, is loved to the last by her husband and is brought to "as

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<sup>1</sup> Aphra Behn, *The History of the Nun: or the Fair Vow-Breaker*, Vol. 3 of *The Works of Aphra Behn*, ed. Janet Todd (London: William Pickering, 1995) 215-16. All citations from *The History of the Nun* and her other novels are to this edition and I cite hereafter with page number in parenthesis.

perfect a State of Happiness as this troublesome World can afford" (48) in spite of her wicked deeds, including alluring her page to murder her own sister. While Miranda is pardoned for being wanton and is privileged from taking the responsibility for her deeds, Isabella takes it and reaches to her identity or independence, that is, she ceases to be dependent on her husbands.

As long as a woman is privileged on account of being a woman, there is no bridging the gender gap. Miranda's privilege means that the gap is too broad to bridge. The feminocentric strategy in *The Fair Jilt* is a strong opposition to the male-dominated society. Her uxorious husband, Prince Tarquin, appears to make amends for woman as a representative of man. But he is exceptional, so Miranda must be also exceptional. Since we cannot seek any universal truth in exception, *The Fair Jilt* is in a sense merely a fairy tale, though uncommon. It is an important point that no exceptional man appears in *The History of the Nun*. The difference is so great as to produce opposite conclusions, that is, Miranda's happy life and Isabella's execution. Though Miranda's wicked life might deserve much well of execution rather than Isabella's, her happy outcome is what the feminocentric strategy of the novel means. *The History of the Nun*, by contrast, intends to present a different kind of feminocentric strategy from that of *The Fair Jilt* by making the heroine take the responsibility of breaking a vow which results in murder. Her wretched catastrophe is what Behn's feminism seeks to show. We need to consider what Isabella's appellation "the fair vow-breaker" means and what the ending of the novel, her execution, means.

## 2

Nunneries and Nuns are favorite constituents in Aphra Behn's novels. Isabella and Miranda are brought up in a nunnery, and Atlante lives "like

a Vow'd Nun" (172) and is later confined to a nunnery. It is sure that Behn took advantage of the frenzy brought by the *Portuguese Letters*, but she must have felt that she had good reason to take up nunneries and nuns. Curiously enough, we hear her personal voice about a nunnery in the novel:

I once was design'd an humble Votary in the House of Devotion, but fancying my self not endu'd with an obstinacy of Mind, great enough to secure me from the Efforts and Vanities of the World, I rather chose to deny my self that Content I could not certainly promise my self, than to languish (as I have seen some do) in a certain Affliction. . . . (212)

Though we are not sure whether it is Aphra Behn herself or the persona of the narrator that tells this passage, it is safe to say that she has a special feeling over nunneries and nuns. She must have felt that nunneries are against her inclination, or rather, woman's inclination. A nunnery setting comes from her personal feeling rather than the frenzy of the *Portuguese Letters*. A nunnery suggests miserable circumstances of women in society; nuns are confined to a nunnery, so women are confined to the male-dominated society of which hierarchy is seen typically in marriage. These are the places for women to escape from. The narrator, therefore, complains moderately, though not radically, following the passage cited above:

I could wish, for the prevention of abundance of Mischiefs and Miseries, that Nunneries and Marriages were not to be enter'd into, 'till the Maid, so destin'd were of a mature Age to make her own Choices; and that Parents would not make use of their justly assum'd Authority to compel their Children, neither to the one or other; but

since I cannot alter Custom, nor shall ever be allow'd to make new Laws, or rectify the old ones, I must leave the Young Nuns inclos'd to their best Endeavours, of making a Virtue of Necessity; and the young Wives, to make the best of a bad Market. (213)

We should notice the narrator makes it known that there is an affinity between nunneries and marriages. They are the mechanism of submission; nuns submit themselves to God, and wives submit themselves to husbands. It follows that husbands are like God. Nunneries and marriages signify the exemplary predicaments for woman to escape from, so they become the themes of the novels of the feminist writer, Aphra Behn. Behn herself might have tried to surpass the mechanism of marriage by becoming a mistress as well as the famous beauty of the period, Hortense Mancini, to whom Behn dedicated the novel. Mancini demanded a separation from her husband and became a mistress of Charles II. To be a mistress does not mean to get rid of submission to and dependence on man, but it is anyhow to resist the social system of marriage. Behn thinks the unrestrained way of life of Mancini signifies a liberation from subordination imposed on woman. Though it cannot be exemplary and is ethically problematic, it is at the same time to be applauded. Perhaps the dedication to the extravagant woman appears to be hard to be understood, but Behn indeed adores her as she says in the dedication: "*I was impatient for an Opportunity, to tell Your Grace, how infinitely one of your own Sex ador'd You*" (208). Behn is fascinated with her life as a woman. We, therefore, should not take the compliment ironically.

Then we notice the appellation of "*my fair unfortunate Vow-Breaker*" (208) in the dedication. Behn thinks Isabella is merely an unfortunate woman. In other words, it is her ill-fortune that made her a murderess, and Behn does not denounce but sympathizes with her. It is true that Isabella is a vow-breaker as the title of the novel says, but the title does

not claim she is to blame for breaking vows. It is here that the title contains an irony. What the title implies is that a vow-breaker should result in misery or punishment, but the implication is no more than dissimulation. The apparent pat moralization is her strategy. She only dissimulates her feeling and makes herself appear to express causality by calling the heroine "The Fair Vow-Breaker." The causality is nothing but a moral to which the repulsive male-society adheres. As it is to the repulsive society that she presents the novel, she needs to assume to be one of the followers. She manages to fulfill or cater to, I would like to say, the societal expectations by writing lubricious novels, which are ironically referred to in *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding.<sup>2</sup> In point of fact, she has no idea to comply with the societal code as her life itself bespeaks. She only pretends to conform to its moral as Isabella does to conform to the religious moral of the nunnery by concealing her love for Henault. Love for a man is by no means suitable in a nunnery as Isabella as a nun realizes, so she has to disguise her feeling. She is so dexterous in dissembling it that we are told she is a "Fair Dissembler" and contains her love "within the bounds of Dissimulation or Discretion." She is a mistress of dissimulation, and dissimulation can be discretion. Though the society and its moral must not forgive both Isabella and Mancini who are exceptionally uncommon in terms of morals, they are equally to be adored because of living their own lives, that is, pursuing feminine identity. They can be equivalent in this respect, by which the dedication makes sense.

As a nunnery is a source of "Mischiefs and Miseries," Isabella, being confined to a nunnery by her father Count Henrick de Vallary at the age of two, seems to be destined to live an unfortunate life. Although her

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2 See Larry Carver, "The Poet's Heart in a Woman's Body," *Papers on Language and Literature* 14 (1978): 415-16.

father is so tolerant as to leave it to his daughter whether she shall leave the nunnery or return into the world, her confinement smells of patriarchal tyranny. Suffering grief at the death of his wife, Henrick de Vallary determines to take upon him holy orders, but he has no reason to involve little Isabella in his determination, except his authority as her father. We can say she falls a victim of her father's grief because a nunnery is a place to shun as the narrator says in the passage cited above. The situation into which the heroine is precipitated is suitable enough for her to face up to misfortunes peculiar to woman. As though Behn hopes to make amends for it, she invests Isabella with beauty and wit. Anyway, the heroine has to begin her life in a nunnery which is the epitome of woman's suppression.

The narrator could escape from being put in a nunnery, but it goes without saying that two-year-old Isabella cannot. She has no other choice than her father's intention and cannot help obeying him. She is in no position to choose anything. Her mother's death, which is not only unfortunate in itself but also the mother of her misfortunes, leads her to the confinement to a nunnery. But there she takes orders of her own free will and becomes devout:

. . . she was most exemplary Devout in the *Cloyster*, doing more Penance, and imposing a more rigid Severity and Task on her self, than was requir'd, giving such rare Examples to all the *Nuns* that were less Devout, that her Life was a Proverb, and a President, and when they would express a very Holy Woman indeed, they would say, *she was a very ISABELLA*. (219-20)

She is such a perfect nun as to pass into a proverb. But Behn wants to mean that even such a nun would prefer to love a man rather than God. It is of great significance that the exemplary nun, Isabella, would break



her religious vow and run away with a man. That Isabella succumbs to sexual desire bespeaks the author's intention. If the perfect nun would abandon a nunnery, who dares to adhere to it? Precisely, is it worthy of being adhered to? Naturally, Behn expects the reader would answer in the negative. It follows that she attaches little importance to religious vows. They are no more than the suppression of human inclinations.

Katteriena, Isabella's chamber-fellow and Henault's sister, tells Isabella that "before she was a *Nun*, in her more happy days, she was so like her Brother *Bernardo Henault*" (221). Katteriena has been confined to the nunnery by her father because she was found to love his page below her quality. She tells Isabella about her love story or romanticizes it, and she feels that she had "more happy days" when she loved a man. She reveals unconsciously her feeling. Nunneries are to deprive woman of love, which is true of Atlante, the heroine in *The Lucky Mistake*. She is also confined to a nunnery by her father lest "she should be the cause of the Murther of two such Noble Men" (196), and her love, Rinaldo, tries to steal her from thence and marry her. Nunneries are places to which a father confines his daughter with a view to making her abandon her passion. Behn as a female writer cheers the heroine choosing sexual love and escaping from the nunnery.

### 3

Isabella makes every effort to dismiss Henault from her mind but to no purpose. Austere practices, such as prostrating herself before the altar and praying all night in cold winter, and mortifications on the cold marble, cannot make her abandon her passion. Her resolution to dedicate herself to Heaven gives way to love for Henault. Since Isabella as a nun is not permitted love, she conceals her passion from Katteriena, who tried in vain to dissuade her from loving Henault, only to be a dissembler

though "in the course of her Life, she never could be charg'd with an Untruth, or an Equivocation" (228). Overhearing Henault's passion, she also exercises the dissimulating skill to him in order to make him the first aggressor: "she now, with her Woman's Skill, begins to practice an Art she never before understood, and has resource to Cunning" (227-28). Tactics in love is characteristic of Behn's works, but Isabella, "being by Nature innocent," confesses untactically when she is left alone with him:

Hurried by an unknown Force, which I have endeavoured always, in vain, to resist, I am compell'd to tell you, I love you, and have done so from the first moment I saw you; and you are the only Man born to give me Life or Death, to make me Happy or Blest; perhaps, had I not been confin'd, and, as it were, utterly forbid by my Vow, as well as my Modesty, to tell you this, I should not have been so miserable to have fallen thus low, as to have confess'd my Shame. . . . (233)

It is Isabella that confesses love first, and it is the nunnery that makes her confess love. The nunnery helps her to confess love rather than to abandon it. It is too helpless to subdue her inclinations, and rather furnishes her with courage or boldness. At last, she determines to slip the chains of nunnery and to marry Henault:

She had at last vanquish'd her Heart in favour of him, and loving him above all things, Honour, her Vow or Reputation, had resolv'd to abandon her self wholly to him, to give up her self to love and serve him and that she had no other Consideration in the World. . . . (236)

It is Isabella that positively pushes forward with their affair. She assigns the day and the hour for her escape, and Henault is just waiting for her.

While Isabella urges him to a runaway marriage, Henault seems to be somewhat slow of action. His slowness can be explained by the presentation that he is "unus'd to Action, and of a temper Lazy, and given to Repose" (220). Though he is so agreeable and full of wit as to be a suitable person for her to marry, he has this fault, kind of. It is indeed a little fault, but the author characterizes him deliberately as thus. By doing so, Behn can have the heroine take the initiative in the runaway marriage, that is, the liberation from the nunnery which leads to pursuing identity. Isabella is not a woman who is ready to yield herself blindly to passivity. What's more, the reader is reasonably persuaded that he will not make a good soldier when he consents reluctantly to his father's demand that he should go to a campaign, "either to serve the Venetian against the Turks, or into the French Service" (241).<sup>3</sup> Anyway, Behn is likely to intend to make Henault unsuitable for Isabella.

Isabella is sixteen years old when she dares to run away with Henault. Though the author applauds her preference for love rather than religious vows, she is too young to be prudent. But she is prudent enough to prepare the money for the forthcoming marriage life. She is in a sense practical and far from a heroine of romance though she says she has no other considerations than love. But the narrator tells deliberately that "Isabella was the most Prudent of her Sex, at least, had hitherto been so esteem'd" (238). This reference is worthy of notice. She implies that Isabella is no longer prudent and that she should reap as she has sown.

The narrative of Isabella does not end with the consummation of love in marriage, unlike the romance which ends conventionally with it. As the narrator manifests an affinity between nunneries and marriages in the beginning of the novel, it would not end with the heroine's marriage,

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3 Henault chooses the former, and this reference dates the time in which the novel unfolds.

which may bring about "abundance of Mischiefs and Miseries." Isabella got liberty by escaping from the nunnery through love which made her break religious vows, but the marriage which is the culmination of love would deprive her of liberty in turn. This is a paradox not to be solved, which Behn intends to pursue in the novel. Love is the ultimate and supreme goal for woman, not marriage. Love is the realization of feminine identity, but marriage is the suppression of it. It is because the former is self-assertive and the latter is self-effacing. Love can dominate man, but marriage means that woman conforms to the customs of the male-dominated society. As Ros Ballaster insists, "Women's 'value' then lies in their capacity to reflect and enlarge male desire," not in their position of marriage.<sup>4</sup> The paradox of love and marriage is a major subject in Behn's works.

Henault does not make a tyrannical husband at all as his womanish character suggests, but he does not make a good husband, either. Henault and Isabella drive out of Iper (a town in West Belgium) to a little town upon the Rhine, where they get married forthwith under a false name, Beroone. Certainly they need to change their name not to be discovered, but the necessity can be serious for their identities.<sup>5</sup> As a name is essential to the identity, changing a name can lead up to changing the identity or losing it. So, woman might lose her identity through changing her name in marriage. In the case of the marriage of Henault and Isabella, as they assume the same false name, it is not the wife alone that is at a disadvantage. They are on equal terms in this respect, which suggests that he will not make an authoritative husband. But anyway, assuming a false name is incompatible with pursuing

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4 Ros Ballaster, *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 91.

5 We know that Aphra Behn herself had the alias, Astrea.

identity. For Isabella, pursuing love is compatible with pursuing identity, but it results in the marriage that forces her to assume a false name, that is, to surrender her identity.

What does Isabella gain from the marriage to him? Nothing but misfortunes. Their farming trade does not thrive, their cattle die, their crops are mildewed or blasted, and their barns are fired. Their misfortune passes into a proverb: "if any ill Luck had arriv'd to any body, they would say, *They had Monsieur Broone's Luck*" (240). We remember her piousness passed into a proverb. She seems to advance toward an extremity.

Their misfortune compels him to comply reluctantly with his father's demand that he should be a soldier, on which terms he should gain his pardon. But what he brings his wife from the battlefield is the word of his death. It is bad news to Isabella, but what's worse, false news.

#### 4

Henault makes a friend of Villenoy's in the battlefield, who was such a passionate lover of Isabella and proposed to her. Villenoy's has the unhappiness to see his friend fall under attack of the enemy, and has the mistaken idea that he is dead. And he writes to Isabella about the supposed death of her husband. This is a double misfortune for Isabella; for one thing, she is told her husband was dead, and for another, the truth of the matter is that he is alive. She spends three years mourning over her husband's death, and then she marries Villenoy's after his eager and insistent proposal. But, since Henault is alive, she commits the crime of bigamy, that is to say breaking a matrimonial vow, without knowing it. Her grief and crime are great consequences caused by her breaking religious vows, though she is not responsible for the supposed death of her husband and bigamy.

She had no alternative but to marry him as her aunt the Lady Abbess died, on whom she felt complete reliance:

and with her, all the Hopes and Fortune of Isabella [died], so that she was left with only a Charming Face and Meen, a Virtue, and a Discretion above her Sex, to make her Fortune within the World. . . . (245)

What can she get with such a weapon but marriage? Her circumstances drive her to marry him. The narrator, therefore, informs us that "'t was for Interest she married again, tho' she lik'd the Person very well" (245). We know that she has withstood the grief over her husband's death for three years and that she had abided by her vow to remain alone three years before the second marriage, but she has no other means than the marriage. However, we should notice that she does not lower herself to marry. She marries him because she likes him. The narrator tries to inform us of that by remarking deliberately that "she lik'd the Person very well." In addition to it, we remember that Isabella once said to him that "if she ever could have lov'd, she believ'd it would have been Villenoy's, for he had all the good Qualities, and grace, that could render him agreeable to the Fair" (217-18) though she refused his love. In actual fact, it will be Henault that she loves, but the narrator here emphasizes purposely that he is agreeable to her. In short, it is no wonder Isabella marries again to Villenoy's this time. She seems to be happy in the second marriage as such:

She liv'd in this Tranquility, belov'd by all, for the space of five Years, and Time (and perpetual Obligations from *Villenoy's*, who was the most indulgent and indearing Man in the World) had almost worn out of her Heart the Thought of *Henault*. . . . (247)

Paradoxically, it is not because Henault died but because he is alive that misfortunes befall to Isabella. When Villenoy is away to hunt, a man visits Isabella. This man is Henault. Being left among the dead in the battlefield, he was found to be alive and sold as a slave by the enemy. But at last he finds an opportunity to make his escape and comes all the way to see her. Isabella being married to Henault, it is the very "Shame and Confusion" that he brings to her. Shame is the crime of bigamy, and confusion is her true feeling because "she now lov'd only Villenoy" (249). The narrator remarks that "she could not recall her Love, for Love, like Reputation, once fled, never returns more." A remark with relish. Though the narrator says "it is not my Business to relate the History of the War, being wholly unacquainted with the Terms of Battels" (243), the supposedly female narrator would like to say that love is her pet subject and is the domain of female writers.

There is no one who caused them the embarrassing outcome on purpose. It is merely the work of misfortune. But, as her second marriage eventuates in bigamy, Isabella must settle the matter whether she likes it or not. She resolves upon murdering Henault "as the only means of removing all Obstacles to her future Happiness" (251) and carries the resolution into execution without a shade of hesitation. The narrator illustrates how far one, however pious, can go for happiness. Curiously enough, we are not surprised at her wicked deed, the transgression; for she never yielded to the religious doctrine, which she has demonstrated by the runaway marriage after taking orders. But her future happiness cannot come notwithstanding the murder as we suppose. It is not to be the first and the last murder. She murders not only the first husband but also the second because she imagines that "*Villenoy* would be eternal reproaching her, if not with his Tongue, at least with his Heart" (253). Though he is fond and kind enough to propose to dispose of the corpse by throwing it away into a river for the safety of her honour, she is set upon murdering

him. When he has the sack with the body on his back, she sews it on the collar of his coat without his perceiving it, and then she bids him go to the bridge and give it a good swing so that he may fall into the stream as well. The second murder is thus accomplished, but she has far less excuse than the first as the narrator adds. As she was "embolden'd by one Wickedness, she was the readier for another, of such a Nature" (253).

In the case of Miranda in *The Fair Jilt*, she becomes happy after her various wicked deeds, and the novel ends with telling her getting happiness. It is the feminocentric ending with which Aphra Behn hopes to present the reader in society where women have no other means but themselves to cope with difficulties. She seems to favour women, the underdogs, too much in the novel. But, in contrast, Behn provides Isabella with the unhappy ending as the result of her wickedness. She is executed. Isabella, as miserable as her conclusion is, gives a flicker of hope to women. This is another strategy that Behn adopts in *The History of the Nun* which she intends to be feminocentric as well.

## 5

The vow-breaker becomes the murderess. A sin leads to a more serious sin. Isabella is certainly by no means exemplary, nor ideal. But we ought to notice that she commits sins of her own free will, not under coercion. She prefers love and happiness to sins at her own risk. Love is not her fault. She is not to be blamed for giving priority to love. We cannot take it that "love is no excuse."<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, vows are no excuse for abandoning love. The heroine, though "unfortunate," herself chose her love and led her own life. She, therefore, confesses voluntari-

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6 Janet Todd, *The Critical Fortunes of Aphra Behn* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998) 77.



ly the whole matter of fact before the magistrate of justice and receives sympathy: "every one bewail'd her Misfortune, and she alone was the only Person, that was not afflicted for her self" (257). Though she interprets breaking a vow as "first the Ruin of her" and exhorts the young never to break a vow, it is doubtful that she regrets her life; for it is also doubtful that remaining in the nunnery against her love for Henault would bring her to happiness. Her warning against breaking a vow is merely an apparent moral lesson that Aphra Behn manages to extract from the life of the heroine for the moralistic reader. Contrary to her warning, she seems to be content with her life including the deplorable ending:

When the Day of Execution came, she appear'd on the Scaffold all in Mourning, but with a Meen so very Majestick and Charming, and a Face so surprising Fair, where no Languishment or Fear appear'd, but all Cheerful as a Bride. . . . (257)

Here we see the true shape of the heroine. She accepts the responsibility for her deeds resolutely and even cheerfully. As she once chose love, she chooses the responsibility rather than the flight. Responsibility signifies both independence and freedom. Those who are dependent on someone are not to accept responsibility, without which one cannot be free. Isabella demonstrates she is independent and free in the male-dominated society by being ready to receive the severe sentence. Her identity is thus completed. She can get the identity not only as female but also as individual. Female identity or self-identity is the reward for her execution. It is the precious and venerable reward worthy of replacing life with it. This is the heroine the author intends to show us. The narrative is intended to be not a moral lesson to the vow-breaker but a eulogy to her. Isabella stands as an excellent example of self-realization,

though paradoxically she results in a pathetic death. And the author persuades us to think that this paradox is due to the male-dominated society. The distorted society where Isabella realizes her identity only through her execution is the mother of this paradox, which Aphra Behn intends to accuse in the narrative of an unfortunate beauty.