

**Girls Just Wanna Have Fun: The Truth behind the Desiring Nun Archetype and
the Stereotypical use of the Convent as a Setting in the 18th Century Literature of
Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood**

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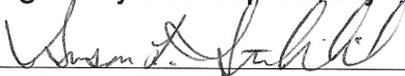
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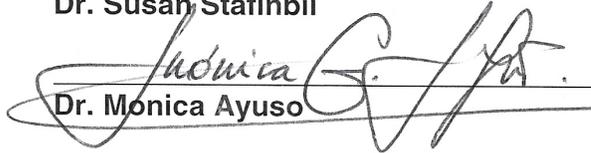
**Girls Just Wanna Have Fun: The Truth behind the Desiring Nun Archetype
and the Stereotypical use of the Convent as a Setting in the 18th Century
Literature of Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood**

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The literature and drama of the long eighteenth century is overpopulated with nuns, and they are all transgressors of patriarchal society in one way or another. These nuns are all vow-breakers, fornicators, and fallen women; whether they were ruined after taking their holy vows or took their vows as a way to escape a society who rejected them for being ruined, there is one thing that is certain: Catholic nuns of eighteenth century literature are clearly trouble. This theme is too pervasive to be a mere whim, so where does this negative view of Catholic women monastics come from? Some of the blame can certainly be placed on the anti-Catholic sentiment that saturated Protestant England's society, but more of it can be placed on the even more pervasive anti-woman sentiment in England at this time.

What is even more surprising is that this anti-woman stance is seemingly taken up by even the female authors of the time. Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood both have a remarkable amount of novels and plays that reference nuns and convent life, and, if given only a cursory reading, they may seem to uphold the view of women monastics, and even women in general, as laughable. However, while their works may seem to argue against autonomous women, when examined within the historical context of not only nuns but also women of the time and viewed through the more contemporary lenses of popular culture and feminist theory, it becomes very clear that they were twisting this well-known archetype to their own purpose. Although they were following the usual pattern for these types of stories in many ways, there were very slight variations in the works that made them stand out from the others; however, these variations might not have been noticed because the works of women authors were not subjected to any critical treatment or given any real consideration at all as culturally important works until almost two centuries later.

Women and Convents in the Eighteenth-Century

To understand the cultural context that Behn and Haywood were building on, it is first necessary to closely examine the English understanding of nuns in an eighteenth century context. In her essay “‘For Virgin Buildings oft Brought Forth’: Fantasies of Convent Sexuality,” Kate Chedgzov points out that, to the people of England at this time Catholic monastics were, largely, unknown because “between the dissolution of the convents between 1536-39 and the foundation of the Bar Convent at York in 1686 there were no convents [there]”(61). For more than a century there were no Catholic nuns in England, so for English audiences and readers, the nun was a fantasy, and was used by authors as a sort of mythical character that most people had never actually encountered. Therefore, writers made generous use of artistic license to create a stock character that represented what Frances E. Dolan calls, in her article “Why Are Nuns Funny?,” the “part of Catholicism that is to be dismissed rather than feared: the absurdity of female authority and separatism” (Dolan 509). Society at this time saw the idea of women living separately from men so laughable that these women became stock characters who were incapable of success in life. They were either horrible, sadistic Abbesses or fragile young women with no autonomy, desperately in need of men to save them by stealing them away from the confines of the convent and marrying them.

In the literary works of this time the convents themselves were also a standard setting. In her article “Jane Barker and the Politics of Catholic Celibacy,” Tonya Moutry McArthur argues that authors often made use of convents “as a plot device: the possibility of clostration is often a threat to young women who disobey their cruel parents, an escape from them if they wish to

avoid an unavoidable marriage, a barrier that prohibits amours and thus increases desire, a last resort for women who are ruined, or a temporary depository for women who are not needed currently in the narrative”(602). Convents as a plot device were often vilified, used as a threat for young women who failed to conform to societal norms, or both of these. To examine the question of why Protestants would have been so fascinated with the Catholics who had long ago left England, one must consider the history of nuns in England.

Despite the fact that convents were banished from England along with all of the other Catholic organization, there were still “English nuns after the Reformation, [but] they did not live in England and they were not especially visible from there” (Dolan 510). Devout English Catholic women did not all give up their religion because their monarch said to; some of them simply fled the country. The fact that these women were forced to leave the country is one of the primary reasons why they were still so talked about in England. The women of these convents chose to deny the government mandated religion, leave their country, and flout tradition by deciding to live on their own, with no male relative in attendance to oversee their lives. In short, they ignored every culturally prescribed role deemed appropriate for a woman by defying their monarch, leaving their families, refusing to conform to the accepted religion, and refusing to marry and help their husbands continue their family names by bearing children. They did all of this during a time when women were taught that their most desirable quality was obedience.

It is true that Catholic monks of the time were also banished from England, but the idea of men leaving home and being in charge of their own lives and decisions was not nearly so

strange. According to Ellen Pollack's article, "The Poetics of Sexual Myth: Gender and Ideology in the Verse of Swift and Pope," during this time, "the burden of productivity fell increasingly to men, women became the embodiment of moral value, exemplifying at her best a passive and contemplative (in some ways a curiously catholic) ideal" (Pollack 42). Therefore, men who chose to work and live on their own were still conforming to some gender expectations, even if they were Catholic. Women of any religion that chose to provide for themselves were an abnormality even if they did maintain the ideology of a passive, virtuous woman. Because of these particular circumstances, convents were not simply seen as places of devotion; instead, they were "centers of political and cultural resistance, allowing women an alternative to marriage and motherhood and serving as spaces within which single and married women found fellowship and retreat, education and spiritual direction" (McArthur 597). To a modern mind, this may not seem that exceptional, but to the patriarchal English mind, this was unnatural and deserving of mockery. Not only was the idea of women living self-sufficiently a matter of great humor for Protestant men, the idea that women did not wish to marry was also a matter for public concern.

Celibacy was a particular matter on which the Catholic and Protestant Churches disagreed. Pollack reminds us that puritan preachers believed marriage "was a high spiritual calling for both sexes and the conjugal relation an image of Christ's relation to the church. Where the Catholic Church had traditionally placed virginity and celibacy above marriage, which is regarded as unclean, the protestant sects of the German and English Reformation recognized matrimony as a natural state" (40). Not only were nuns ridiculous because they were women who disregarded the religion which was endorsed by the monarch, they were also women who

lived in an unnatural state because they refused to marry and procreate. The patriarchal structure was so firmly entrenched in Protestant society that women who refused to help perpetuate the system by aiding in the production of the next generation were seen as unnatural because virginity was “‘virtuous’ only when its preservation actively served the ends of a system of patriarchal marriage that assigned it to the proprietorship and utility of men” (Pollack 55). Virginity was only seen as a positive attribute if the men in charge could benefit from it, and these men saw no benefit in women who locked themselves away from society and refused to participate in it in the culturally prescribed manner.

Women living by themselves in a community were not just seen as a problem by the Protestants either; the leaders of the Catholic Church struggled with the problem of letting women live on their own as well. Within Catholicism, chastity was seen as a virtue in both men and women, and they saw marriage as merely “a necessary evil for the propagation of the race and the avoidance of sexual sin” (Pollack 40). Therefore, the Catholic Church was obligated to support the idea of women committing themselves to a chaste life; however, there was a great deal of debate and uncertainty surrounding how the nuns should be allowed to live. Even in the century before Aphra Behn began writing, there were documented cases of the men of the Catholic Church trying to curb what was seen as immoral behavior in convents. Juntta Gisela Sperling, in her book *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, discusses the policy of *clausura*, which was implemented by the Council of Trent in 1563. This policy imposed “strict enclosurement (*clausura*) on all female religious communities independently of their individual rules, privileges, and exceptions” (115). No matter the vows each woman had agreed to upon entering her particular convent, she was now subject to strict *clausura*, which meant

that all nuns were now under strict orders not to interact with society even in order to do charitable works. Despite the fact that charitable works was a major tenant of the Catholic Church, these women were asked to abandon these works and remain within the walls of the convent at all times.

This policy was, however, hard to enforce because most nuns insisted “on their ancient privileges and exemptions” (Sperling 115), but the men of the church still attempted to make sure that all monastic women were kept strictly within the walls of their cloisters. The leaders of the church claimed that they were enacting this policy because of the nuns “constant violations of monastic discipline—most particularly neglect of chastity” (115). Even as early as the sixteenth century, nuns were being accused of breaking their vows, and this was such a large and well known problem that the church felt the need to act on it in a very public and widespread manner so that the “infection” of unchaste nuns would not spread any further. It was even believed that “sexually active nuns did not just create a plague-like disorder; ‘nuns-turned-whores’ literally caused the plague as a manifestation of God’s wrath” (126). Not only were nuns seen to be dishonest and promiscuous, but their actions were actually thought to be a very real threat to public health and safety; therefore, nuns were not just a problem to Protestant Clergy, who thought that women needed to marry and help populate the human race or even just a threat to all men who sought to keep women under the control of a patriarchal social structure. They were a very real threat to the lives of the people around them.

Nuns were not a problem because they were Catholic; they were a problem because they were women who lived outside the normal rules of society, which meant that society

viewed them as unpredictable and even dangerous. Women in the eighteenth century were little more than property: first to their fathers and then to their husbands. At this time “when political power depended on the possession of landed wealth rather than royal favor, the object of upper-class marriage became more exclusively economic than it had been in the century before” (Pollack 31-2). If wealth and power were primarily acquired through the accumulation of important land, and land was generally inherited within a family, then the primary source of new wealth was through the creation of new family ties, so marriage was more important than ever. This made women an important and valuable commodity, but they were not valued as people; they were valued as a means to obtain wealth and little more. Pollack notes that despite the increase in women’s ability to inherit land, “what was really enhanced by late seventeenth-century changes in property laws was not the economic power of women but their indirect, intermediary, and passive economic role in a system of inheritance that remains at once patronymic and patrilineal” (33). The fact that women could inherit their father’s land only made them a more valuable asset that he was still free to dispose of as he wished. Rather than giving the women more economic freedom, it just increased their market value for potential husbands because the husbands were the ones who would ultimately have control of the inheritance when it came. The competition for good husbands was made even fiercer by the recent civil wars, which meant, “the availability of landed husbands . . . was at an unusual low” (Pollack 32). Women were not only expected to marry, they were expected to marry whomever their father thought would financially benefit the family the most, and daughters who joined convents did neither of these things.

These social mores would have been well known and well established within the English community, even if they were not explicitly stated, because of the competition and the importance placed on marriage by families. In her brief biography of Aphra Behn in *The Rise of the Woman Novelist*, Jane Spencer notes that Behn was obviously aware of the expectancies of women in society and the fact that she was not meeting them by being a female writer. According to Spencer, Behn is said to have made “tart remarks that women were equally entitled to write bawdy, and that people would have admired her plays more had they been written by a man” (42); however, Spencer goes on to argue that while “Behn is not without concern for her sex and for women’s freedom . . . Still, it is outsider her plays that she supports women most thoroughly, through her claims for women’s abilities to write” (44). While Behn is noted for supporting women writers outside of her works it has been assumed by many that she defined “her poetic talent as masculine” (43), and that her works conformed to the already established masculine tradition. However, if her works are viewed in the context of the history of women, her nun characters can easily be seen as a satyr of masculine expectation rather than a regurgitation of it. This corresponds more closely to Catherine A. Craft’s assertion that Aphra Behn “appropriates male discourse and turns it to her own use” (825). While seeming to use the archetypical character of the desiring nun to its usual purpose of subverting the idea of a woman capable of governing her own body as well as her own affairs, Behn uses the archetype as a satire of itself.

The Unnatural Nun in the works of Aphra Behn

In Behn's *The Rover*, the audience is presented with a familiar character in the person of Helena; a young woman whose father has declared is destined for a nunnery. Helena is, at first glance, a presentation of a young woman who needs the discipline of a convent or a strict father to curb her loose and self-destructive ways; however, when the audience meets Helena her father is absent and she has not yet taken her vows. Behn uses this character to highlight the absurdity of the notion that women need either strong male guidance or to live locked away with other women.

When the audience first meets Helena, she informs her sister Florinda that she is not "unfit for love" because she has all of the qualities a young woman must have for love: a happy humor, beauty, vigor, and an appealing body (160). Furthermore, Helena has decided to use all of these "to the best advantage" and that Florinda should "lay aside [her] hope of [Helena's] fortune by being a devotee" (160). Helena has all of the outer qualities that would mark her out for success in the marriage market and has decided that she will not be left out. In the time that *The Rover* was written, women were not thought to be capable of making rational decisions on their own; therefore, the idea that "women presuming to overcome or at least control their bodies and failing to do so are predictably and reassuringly ludicrous" (Craft 517). The fact that Helena believes that she is capable of deciding her own fate should mark her out for failure according to the literary expectations of the time because a female character who could have successfully navigated her own decisions would have been unsettling, but this is exactly what Helena is.

Because the play is set in Italy, it is reasonable that the family's younger daughter would have been chosen to enter a convent since convents were still common there. It is also likely that a Protestant audience, because of their view of female celibacy as unnatural, would have applauded Helena's effort to resist, and expected her to fail at keeping her vows; however, Helena's negative views of convent life are matched only by her disparaging remarks about marriage. When Don Pedro is speaking to Florinda about who she will marry, Helena accuses him of casting her sister "into a worse confinement than a religious life" because the man he wished Florinda to marry is old and unattractive (161). Helena's character is not being used simply as a stereotype that presents the celibate state as unnatural; she is being used to illustrate that both of the available options for women, marriage arranged without her consent or a life in a convent, were often both undesirable, and that women should have a say in their own fate.

Behn's Helena is, a rebellious nun, and throughout the play it is made obvious that she "love[s] mischief strangely, as most of [her] sex do, who come to love nothing else" (159), but her behavior is not punished. Helena's claims that women who love nothing else, or celibate women, will all come to love mischief instead, would have been a common refrain in Protestant England, but the end of the play finds Helena engaged to Willmore, which was her design all along. Willmore is not who Don Pedro would chose for his sister because Willmore is known as "a Rover of Fortune" (244) rather than a gentleman of means, but Helena decided that "the three thousand crowns [her] uncle left [her] (and [Don Pedro] cannot keep from [her]) will be better laid out in love than in religion" (244). Helena does indeed choose marriage over a life in a convent, but she does not chose marriage on conventional terms, and neither does Florinda.

Florinda is told by Don Pedro to “consider Don Vincentio’s fortune, and the jointure he’ll make [her]” she replies that Don Vincentio should consider her “ youth, beauty and fortune; which ought not to be thrown away on his age and jointure”(161). Helena is not just an interesting example of a woman in the eighteenth-century who manages to make her own decisions; in addition to managing to manipulate her brother, she also convinces Florinda that she should choose her own husband as well. Like Helena, Florinda is defying tradition and choosing her own future.

Helena rebels at the thought of wasting her youth and beauty in a nunnery while Florinda refuses to waste the same in marriage to an old man for the sake of money even though both of these options would have been considered quite normal and generally accepted without question at the time. Florinda manages to marry Belville who she loves from the beginning because he once “saved [her] from such dangers as the licensed lust of common soldiers threatened, when rage and conquest flew through the city” (161). Florinda chooses to marry the young soldier who was willing to bodily defend her honor for no profit, rather than the old man who would purchase her for his own gain. Despite the fact that the end of the play does find these two women married, which was the only natural and acceptable ending for women, the play ends with each of them married to a man of their own choosing in direct opposition to their father’s, brother’s, and tradition’s wishes, and this is what makes Helena’s character so interesting.

Helena is not just a nun who proves that celibacy is an unnatural and ridiculous state for women; she also proves that women should not be forced to order their lives by either of the

confining choices provided by patriarchal culture. She is so close to a stock character that she may appear to be reinforcing the established institution of marriage, but because she escapes any punishment whatsoever and is actually rewarded for her actions by getting to marry the man of her choosing, she is instead demonstrating that women should have more autonomy in choosing a mate that they find desirable. Furthermore, she has demonstrated this so convincingly that Florinda has decided to follow her precedent. Which gives rise to the idea that women of the time could not only think for themselves, but they could also help each other to get what they want: a dangerous notion for the eighteenth-century.

Helena and Florinda's decisions stand in stark contrast to other popular stories of the time. In *A Remarkable Suicide Impelled by Constant Love* written in 1803, the main character Clementina is also saved from convent life by marriage; however, she has no part in choosing this future for herself. Instead, her cousin Jeronymo saves her. It is Jeronymo who sees her and falls in love with her, and it is Jeronymo that approaches her with the plan that he will appear when she is meant to take her vows and save her at the last moment (7-8). Clementina has no part in this plan and is powerless to help in it in anyway. On the day she is to take her vows she is so nervous that "she trembled violently, and looked anxiously for Jeronymo, who she soon saw standing close to the altar, his eyes met hers and inspired her with courage" (11). She has no agency or courage of her own. The only courage she exhibits is draw directly from Jeronymo. Clementina make it very clear that she had no interest in "taking the fatal vow" (6). She even tells Jeronymo that "Had [she] a fortune, a monastic life would not be [her] choice" (7). However, she makes no plans to save herself as Helena does, and she does not choose who her husband/savior will be; instead, he chooses her.

Furthermore, while Helena and Florinda are able to manipulate their brother into letting them make their own decisions, most female characters are completely and utterly under the rule of their male relatives. In *Eliza, or the Unhappy Nun*, the main character, Eliza, is the product of a catholic father and a protestant mother, but it is her father that decides she will be educated as a catholic (19). When her father realizes that her mother has been secretly subjecting Eliza to Protestantism, what Eliza calls the “established religion,” he rips Eliza from her mother and her home, and sends her to live out the rest of her life in a monastery as a nun (20). Neither Eliza nor her mother have and say in the matter. In fact, after a time in the convent, Eliza learns that her mother had “sunk under grief, which was increased under her husband’s cruel treatment” (20). Eliza herself sees “no method of escaping, as the abbess had shewed [her] a letter from [her] father, in which he threatened [her] with his malediction if [she] refused to comply with his will” and say her vows to become a nun (22). Unlike the women of Behn’s play, Eliza and her mother have no control over their lives. Instead, the male head of the household is free to make their decisions for them, and while he is portrayed as cruel for these decisions his cruelty is due to his religion rather than his sex since Charles, a good protestant man, attempts to save Eliza from the monastery.

Even though Charles does attempt to save Eliza, she is again subject to a man’s decisions because she has to wait for Charles to contact her friend Madeline who can convey to Eliza Charles’ letter which includes his plan for the both of them (23). Eliza, like Clementina, has no control over her future no matter how much she dislikes it; therefore, she must count on a man to save her. This was the established norm of the time, and this is one of the main ways in which Behn’s Helena breaks the archetype of the desiring nun. Helena does not just illustrate

how distasteful a life locked away in a convent would be, which Clementina and Eliza very obviously do. She also makes it clear that being saved by any man that her father or her brother deems suitable is not acceptable to her either, and she is so successful that she spreads this epidemic of female agency to her sister Florinda.

Not all of Aphra Behn's nuns are quite as successful as Helena. Isabella in *The History of the Nun; or, The Fair Vow-Breaker*, is not nearly as lucky. At the beginning of this story, Behn's narrator asserts that "heaven never takes cognizance of lovers' broken vows and oaths, and that 'tis the only perjury that escapes the anger of the gods" (3), yet if a woman were to violate her holy vows taken upon entering a convent "of all broken vows these are those that receive the most severe and notorious punishment" (4). Isabella is, from a young age, dedicated to becoming a nun, and taking these holy vows, but when she is 13, her father makes a show of introducing her to the world so that she is ostensibly given a choice as to whether or not she will join a convent (7). At the age of 13, after having spent a short time outside of the convent, Isabella is deemed worldly and old enough to understand her decision when she takes these vows.

Isabella's father and her aunt the Abbess have to force Isabella to leave the convent for a time because when they bring it up, Isabella "brought forth a thousand reasons and arguments so pious, so devout that the Abbess was very well pleased" (7) However, Isabella is still forced "to go abroad with those ladies of qualities that were her relations . . .to try whether it were not for want of temptation to vanity that made her leave the world and love an enclosed life" (7). While staying with her relations outside of the convent, Isabella proved that

her “conduct and discretion appeared equal to her beauty” (8), and despite the fact that she was a great success and a young man named Villenoy claimed to be physically dying from unrequited love of her, she still resolved to take her vows, so, shortly after, “the ceremonies were completed of making Isabella a nun” (8). Isabella is introduced to the world outside of the convent, but she decided that she sees “nothing in the world that was worth her care or the venturing the losing of Heaven for” (8). Despite the fact that she is given a clear alternative in the form of a young man willing to save her from her fate as a nun with an offer of marriage, Isabella is resolved that nothing outside of life in the convent will make her happy.

In *A Remarkable Suicide Compelled by Constant Love*, the author asserts that “it is custom in Italy to suffer the young females, who are destined to take the veil, to live among their relations from some time previous to their pronouncing their vows which forever separate them from society” (5). However, unlike Isabella who is unimpressed with life outside of the convent, Clementina is “delighted with the life she led, and could hardly conceal her grief when the time of returning to her sad prison approached” (5). The unfortunate Eliza of *Eliza or the Unhappy Nun*, also asserts that living in a convent is “a dreadful life, particularly for one who has tasted the pleasures of this life” (21). From the beginning of Behn’s story, Isabella differs from the stereotypical protestant young women of 18th century literature because she is not rebelling against the convent; she is looking forward to it. If this story were merely a didactic tale about the evils of catholic life, the heroine would not have been so comfortable in that life. Instead, she would have reacted as Eliza and Clementina did when they were sent back to their convents to take their final vows: with very obvious distress.

Despite Isabella's enthusiasm for convent life when she is thirteen, it should come as no surprise to a Protestant readership that Isabella, soon after taking her official vows, falls in love with her fellow nun's brother, Henault, and they manage to run away together and are married (27). Rather than this serving as a happy ending for the story, this is, instead, when the real trouble begins. Isabella is not just breaking a vow to a lover, which would, according to the narrator, be forgiven; she is breaking her solemn vows to God, so she must be punished. After marrying Henault, the young couple struggles to make a living for themselves because they are ostracized by the society that they have offended. Finally, Henault is told by his father that if he were to "leave his wife and go into the French campaign, [his father] would equip him as well as his quality required" (28). So, in order to gain favor with society and his father, Henault leaves for war, and is of course killed for his trouble (30). This might be seen as just punishment for Isabella's having broken her vows, but it is only the beginning of her misfortune. Isabella is remarried after keeping her suitor—who just happens to be the young man who was dying of love for her when she first entered the convent— "off as long as 'twas possible she could subsist" (32). When Isabella's first husband is miraculously found to still be alive, she realizes that she is, quite unexpectedly, guilty of bigamy and so "resolved upon the murder of Henault" (37). If this were not punishment enough for her broken vows she then realizes that if her current husband were ever to find out he would be "eternal[ly] reproaching her, if not with his tongue at least with his heart" so she resolves to drown him (39). The end of the story actually finds Isabella sentenced to death because she has "confessed the whole matter of fact, and, without any disorder delivered herself into the hands of justice as the murderess of two husbands (both beloved) in one night" (42). On cursory inspection, Isabella fulfills the reader's

expectations as outlined by the narrator. She breaks the most sacred of vows, which of course must make her the worst of women. She would seemingly have to be the worst of women to murder two husbands that she professed to love; however, Behn once again complicates matters by vilifying society rather than Isabella.

At the beginning of the novel, Behn's narrator stresses the idea that in order to prevent an "abundance of mischiefs and miseries . . . nunneries and marriages were not to be entered into 'till the maid so destined were of a mature age to make her own choice" (5). The idea of a woman being able to make her own decision in the eighteenth-century at all is a signifier that Behn is straying from convention, but there is also the fact that when Isabella is forced to choose between marriage and a nunnery she is only thirteen. At this young age, she is expected to know what she wants for the rest of her life, which was a normal assumption for the time. Once again Behn is not only just using a nun character to comment on the follies of the Catholic Church, she is using her to comment of the institutionalized view of women and marriage as well because it is very obvious that, at such a young age, Isabella is incapable of making these decisions that have life long consequences.

Isabella was made to choose between married life and the nunnery at too young an age, but she also chose her first husbands rashly because of her age, inexperience, and cultural pressures. When Isabella is married to Henault "he found nothing of his industry thrive" (27), and it is implied that this is because the couple is cursed for having broken a vow to God. However, when Henault is first introduced to the reader it is said that "as he was eldest son to so great a father, he was kept at home while the rest of his brothers were employed in wars

abroad; this made him of a melancholy temper and fit for soft impression"; he is also described as "bookish" and "lazy" (11). Given this description, it is more likely that "his ill success . . . is his own" (Craft 826). Henault and Isabella's troubles are not because of a curse from God, they are because Isabella, inexperienced in life and love, has chosen a husband who is just as unqualified and unable to provide for her as she is for herself. This young couple, who were both raised sheltered and pampered, one in a convent and the other in a rich home, were completely unprepared for an unprotected life, so when they are exiled from the society that has sheltered and pampered them since infancy, they are, unsurprisingly, unable to make their way in the world with any degree of success.

Furthermore, when Isabella remarries into an unintentionally bigamous relationship, she is forced by society into that position as well. Shortly after Henault is killed, her Aunt, the Abbess, died "and with her all the hopes and fortunes of Isabella" (32) because now, with no family and no convent to go back to, Isabella is completely unable to provide for herself since it was unacceptable for a woman of her station to have a career or even an occupation of their own. So, Isabella was left with no family, no income, and therefore no choice but to marry her former suitor Villenoy because "in a society that offers no work for upper-class women, a society much like Behn's own, that offers women only economic dependence, Isabella must take her face and reputation to market and obtain a husband" (Craft 827). Isabella kills her husbands because she is afraid that they and society will never forgive her for marrying two men at the same time, but it is society that forced her into marrying again in the first place, so all of the terrible decisions that lead her to this sad end, are made because she believe it is what society expects of her.

Throughout *The History of the Nun*, Isabella is placed in positions where she is forced by society to make decisions that society will inevitably judge her for. It could be argued that this is simply a didactic tale, and that Isabella is created by Behn to warn young women about breaking vows and how unnatural life as a nun is, but if Isabella is indeed a vile and deceitful murderess, why does she retain the appearance of a saint throughout the novel? Even when Isabella is sentenced “to lose her head,” her “sentence [is] joyfully received” (Behn 42). In fact, in her last moments Isabella

appeared on the scaffold all in mourning but with a mien so very majestic and charming and a face so surprising fair, where no languishment or fear appeared but all cheerful as a bride, that she set hearts a flaming even in the mortifying minutes of preparation for death. She made a speech of half an hour long, so eloquent, so admirable a warning to the Vow-Breakers that it was as amazing to hear her as to behold her. (42)

Despite the fact that Isabella has broken the vows she made as a nun and killed her two husbands, Behn still refuses to vilify her. Isabella still appears as a paragon of virtue to the crowd that has seen her confess her guilt.

In Clementine’s tale, when it is discovered that the spiteful Abbess is guilty of poisoning Clementina after Jeronymo saves her from the convent, the abbess is portrayed in the most unfavorable light possible. When she is convicted of the crime, the crowd cannot wait for her to be delivered to justice and executed, and she is certainly not allowed to give a thirty minute speech; instead, the gathered crowd “tore her forcibly from the hands of the officers of justice;

her supplications were in vain; and the wretch, after suffering every ignominy they could inflict, expired by their hands: a dreadful example of monastic cruelty” (13). The Abbess who poisons Clementina on her wedding day because Clementina managed to escape her fate as a nun, is clearly meant to be a vilification of catholic monasticism. When she is convicted of a crime, the crowd hates her so much that they tear her bodily apart rather than waiting for her to be executed by a court. The crowd that witnesses Isabella’s execution, despite the fact that she has killed two husbands in a very short time, shows pity for Isabella while the women in the other nun stories are categorically despised, like the abbesses, or utterly helpless, like the young victims and their mothers. Behn’s characters are neither of these. Even Isabella who becomes a victim at the end, is a victim because of the helplessness of her situation and not because she is incapable of action that is not sanctioned by a man.

Behn might appear to be using her nuns to criticize the Catholic Church and the women who choose to join its ranks, but she is actually accomplishing much more with these characters. She is using them to criticize the common tradition of forcing women into either of the roles that society deemed appropriate for them. Helena is not just happy to escape her fate as a nun, she is happy to have been smart enough to maneuver her brother into letting her choose her own husband. Isabella is not just cursed to a terrible fate because she is a vow-breaker; she is cursed because society has forced her to make decisions that she is in no way prepared to make, and then punishes her when those decisions turn out badly. By using these characters in this way, Behn provides the careful reader with a scathing critique of the English attitudes towards women in general, and because the nun was such a well-established

archetype of feminine folly in English culture Behn could have counted on her audience being able to understand these references.

The Convent: Paradise or Punishment in the works of Eliza Haywood

Eliza Haywood often uses convents as a setting in her stories, rather than the character of nuns, but the overall effect is very similar. In Haywood's works, convents are often not introduced until the end, and upon first inspection it may seem as if she is using the setting of a convent as "a last resort for women who are ruined" (McArthur 602) as many other authors of the time were doing, but, because of the context of Haywood's stories, it can be argued that she is using this setting as a utopic fantasy of female community. In Haywood's *Fantomina: or, Love in a Maze*, the main character disguises herself in order to keep the interest of a reluctant lover, and, predictably, finds herself pregnant as a result of her very successful efforts. After several romantic encounters with Beauplaisir, the heroin of the novel realizes that "he designed to leave her behind." Therefore, she decides that since

Complaints, Tears, Swooning, and the Extravagancies which Women make use of in such Cases have little Prevalence over a Heart inclined to rove and only serve to render those who practice them more contemptible by robbing them of that Beauty which alone can bring back the fugitive lover, she resolved to take another course.

(233-4) Our protagonist, who is never named in the text, plays the parts of Fantomina the prostitute (231), Celia the country girl (234), Widow Bloomer (235), and Incognita the mysterious woman of means (242) in order to hold the interest of her amour: Beauplaisir. It is only when the protagonist goes into labor at a party that she is no longer able to hide her

condition from her family, and her mother is only able to get her to name her child's father by threatening to withhold the help of a doctor (247). After the nameless young woman has delivered her child, her mother has a very surprised Beauplaisir brought to the house. Beauplaisir of course does not recognize the young woman because he has never interacted with her out of costume before, and the mother and he are "most surprised" when the protagonist finally relates the entire tale to them (248). The mother and Beauplaisir both agree that the young woman cannot expect a marriage proposal because "the blame is wholly hers," so the young woman is sent to a convent to live out the rest of her life (248). Again, this tale might, if only given a cursory examination, be just an example of a young woman who very willingly loses her virtue and is deservingly shunned from society; however, this analysis would ignore some very important details of the story.

Traditionally, amatory fiction, if it is to end happily, must end with the young lovers married, or if it is to end in tragedy—and so teach young women everywhere a lesson—it should end in death or a convent. Because she was "figured as the reverse of ornament, an unmarried woman was an embodiment of deformity and decay" in Protestant English society (Pollack 58), societal norms would assume that the ruined woman of this novella could only end her life happily if it ended with marriage to Beauplaisir. This might be true if it were not for the fact that she did not wish to marry him anymore than he wished to marry her. At one point in the story, this young woman even remarks that if she were to marry Beauplaisir, the very best she could hope for is "a cold, insipid, husband-like lover in [her] arms; but by the Art of passing on him as a new lover whenever the Ardor, which alone makes love a blessing, begins to diminish, for the former one, [she has] him always raving, wild, impatient, longing, dying" (243).

She has no desire to spend the rest of her life with a man who is tired of her, and since she has decided that this is a condition that cannot be otherwise avoided, she chooses to subvert this natural condition by adopting a different persona whenever his passion seems to be subsiding. Rather than passively taking what society has to offer, this young woman would have a lover who will always feel passionately about her, and she obviously does not believe that a husband could be such a lover; therefore, she is willing to flout convention to accomplish her plan. If marriage to him would only mean a brief period of happiness followed by a lifetime of indifference then “marriage with this hero is a consummation devoutly *not* to be wished for” (Craft 831).

The young woman and her mother even refuse to let Beauplaisir take charge of the baby girl that is technically, according to the patrilineal laws of England at that time, his responsibility; however, just as the young woman does not wish to be saved by Beauplaisir, she does not need him to save her daughter either, so “neither of them would consent to that; and he took his leave”(248). The young woman is ultimately sent to “a monastery in *France*, the Abbess of which had been her [mother’s] particular friend” (248). The editors of this edition, Paula R. Backscheider and John J. Richetti, inform the reader via footnote that the monasteries in France were “centers of learning, and fashionable women often stayed there. They received visitors, improved their education (dancing, music, art, poetry, and languages flourished), and enjoyed the society of other cultured women” (248). Therefore, the young protagonist’s punishment at the end of the novella begins to seem like less of a punishment. Instead, this young woman maintains control over her life and the life of her daughter, and she is sent to live somewhere where she will be allowed to improve her education and enjoy the society of other

well educated women. This idyllic representation of convent life—though brief and easy to miss since it only consists of one paragraph and a footnote—is incredibly different from the depictions offered in other works of the time.

While Haywood's main character is clearly taking charge of her own life and does not seem to mind going to a convent, this was not the usual reaction to be looked for in literature of this time. Female characters were expected to be completely devastated by their exile from England and the Protestant Church. In *The Distressed Nun* by Isaac Crookenden, Herselia's reaction is much more dramatic. When Herselia's father finds out that she is attempting to marry a man that he does not approve of, he tells her that she must spend the rest of her life in a convent (4). At this point, Herselia, "overcome with the violence of her emotions, . . . sank to all appearances lifeless at her father's feet" (4). When the scene is later recounted to Vincentio, her intended, it is said that "it was a distressing scene, . . . to see her dragged away from her home, while she clung to the knees of her father and entreated for mercy" (6). Instead of giving the impression that she is not troubled by the prospect of life in a convent, as Haywood's character does, Crookenden's Herselia is literally struck insensible and then dragged away kicking and screaming to her new life.

Similarly, in *Eliza or the Unhappy Nun*, when Eliza is told by her cruel catholic father that she must go to a convent, she is torn "cruelly from [her] beloved mother's embraces, and sent . . . to this hated place" (20). These women were not all right with being sent to a convent or even calmly accepting of their fate; rather, they were viciously torn from their lives. Furthermore, when Eliza's attempts to escape the convent are made know to the Abbess, the

Abbess has her seized by the other nuns and thrown in to a dark and lonely dungeon (24). Shortly after, Eliza's confidant goes to visit her and witnesses her "kneeling before a crucifix, and with a steady hand, she was drawing a sharp knife through her throat" (25). Not only is Eliza devastated by being sent to a convent; she is so dejected by her life there that she kills herself.

English women may not have had a clear idea about what convent life was really like since convents were mostly a mystery because they had been banished to the Continent, but women of the time heard a lot about the nuns and their convents through literature. Because of "the strange status of nuns as exiles—displaced from England but enshrined in fantasies—"it is reasonable to assume that English women would have had their own ideas about life inside a convent (Dolan 510). The patriarchal culture would have had women believe that celibacy was an unnatural state, but that marriage to a cold, indifferent husband, who was allowed to seek his own pleasure elsewhere after the passions of a new marriage had died, was what God had in mind for all women. If the women writers such as Behn and Haywood can be taken as an example of the women of the time, and these women were beginning to question why they should not also be able to require that their spouse be desirable and pleasant, then it seems natural that they might have also questioned the established stereotypes about convent life as well. If these women believed that society was wrong about them, why wouldn't society also be wrong about the women who chose to live in convents?

The nuns were generally accused of immorality by not just the anti-Catholic Protestants but also by the Catholic Church, which they were supposedly a part of. The power structure

made up of men, be they Protestant or Catholic, had an incredibly hard time coming to terms with women who wanted to live on their own and manage their own affairs. If someone like the protagonist in Haywood's *Fantomina* did not want to conform to the conventions of her society and marry a man because she is so thoroughly convinced that none of them are "able to prolong Desire, to any great Length after Possession" (*Fantomina* 233) it is logical to assume that an alternative society where she will no longer be troubled by the demands that men make on women could hold a great deal of appeal. This young woman is clearly unwilling to conform to the society that she lives in. She wished to have a passionate lover, and if her schemes had not been revealed by her pregnancy she would have continued in her pursuit indefinitely without remorse. She even reveled in her success, declaring that if all women would do as she did "Men would be caught in their own Snare, and have no Cause to scorn [her] easy, weeping, wailing Sex" (243). More than wishing to escape the confines of her androcentric society, she even wished that other women would make an effort to do the same, so being sent to a community of women who appear to have done just that would be a reward rather than a punishment. Furthermore, like Behn's Helena, what makes this young woman particularly dangerous is that she seeks to convince other women to think and act as she has acted, and the fact that she is not in any way punished for her actions seems to support the assumption that she has done nothing wrong.

Haywood takes this idealized vision of female community one-step farther in her novella, *The British Recluse; or, The Secret History of Cleomira, Supposed Dead*. At the end of this story, two women, Belinda and the recluse, who is later revealed to be Cleomira, realize that not only have they both been left by the man that they love, but that it was the same man.

Cleomira knew him as Lysander, while Belinda knew him as Courtal (223). Upon realizing that the same man has wronged both of them, these two women resolve to move into “a House about seventy Miles distant from *London*, where they still live in a perfect Tranquility, happy in the real Friendship of each other” (224). Society scorns these women because of what a man, who is still accepted in society, did to them. In this way, it is made clear that a real friendship can only occur between two people who can treat each other truly as equals, and that this is so contrary to what normally exists within society, where women were usually placed in competition with each other, that these women must absent themselves from that society completely in order to enjoy their friendship.

Unlike the young woman in *Fantomina*, who turned the tables and took advantage of her lover, these two women have both been taken advantage of. The recluse, or Cleomira, was seduced by the man she knew as Lysander and then left by him once he tired of her even though she was pregnant with his child at the time. The grief that she felt at his leaving was so intense that it caused the child to be stillborn (188). Belinda meets the man that she knows as Courtal later and very narrowly avoids being ruined by him. Another of her admirers, Worthy, finds them just before it is too late and challenges Courtal to a duel in which Courtal kills Worthy (211-13). Shortly after this incident Belinda is informed that Courtal had been married the entire time that he was courting her (217). The same man has victimized these two women though he claimed, at different times, to love both of them.

With the character of Courtal/Lysander, Haywood is criticizing many of the men of her time who would face no consequences for seducing a woman although it would ruin the

woman's life. However, instead of entering a religious order, which was still ultimately subject to the rule of the male superiors of the church, to escape the society that would judge them so harshly, they move out into the country where they will not have to see anyone but each other. This fits nicely with Pollack's assertion that society's "high and difficult expectations would seem bound to lead to a comparably high proportion of real failures" (69) and that "sometimes women met the absence of worldly pleasure . . . with the welcoming embrace of exile from it (72). According to modern sensibilities, it is not surprising that Belinda and Cleomira would choose to exile themselves from society, it is only strange that more women would not. This only supports the idea that it is likely that Haywood was using these characters, not to simply criticize the Catholic Church, but to criticize the position of women in society in general because there is clearly no place for them there, but, again, their exile brings them too much pleasure to be considered any kind of punishment. Instead, it more closely resembles a reward.

The ending of this story, which was written three years before *Fantomina*, gives further credence to the idea that Haywood thought an entirely female community cut off from society at large was preferable to living contrary to her own wishes. Belinda finds that "when solitary Life is the effect of *Choice*, it certainly yields more solid Comfort than all the public Diversions which those who are the greatest Pursuers of them can find" (224). The women in both of these stories find that since they were unable to conform to the unreasonable expectations of their society, they would be happier not being a part of it whereas the women of the other stories find no solace unless it is in marriage to a suitable man. More importantly, Belinda emphasizes the importance of this ending being her choice rather than forced on her by someone else, emphasizing the idea that being forced into exile, by being sent to a convent or

just away from your family in general, if it was not your choice, was undesirable. What is important for Belinda is that she gets to choose for herself, which was something that was not generally offered to young ladies of the time.

It might be harder for a modern audience to understand the way that the setting of the convent and the character of the Catholic nun were being used in eighteenth century drama and literature, but an eighteenth century audience would have been familiar with all of the images that their society presented of nuns. It may also seem strange that Behn and Haywood had to be so circumspect in making their points about society's unfair treatment of women. However, in their time it was an unfortunate fact that "men would allow women to write only so long as they produced works which focused upon women and women's subjects, primarily love and marriage, and only so long as their treatment of those subjects remained within the boundaries prescribed by the established male literary traditions" (Craft 821). Today the idea of such a subtle or even encoded message may seem ridiculous to a society that has long been free of any major forms of censorship, but in Behn and Haywood's time it was a simple fact that "women writers who wished to be radical would probably not have been read" (821). This made it so that Behn and Haywood, both women and a part of this patriarchal system themselves, had to use more indirect means to disseminate their messages.

While it is important to keep in mind the reality of the literary market in which Behn and Haywood functioned, it is not as important to dwell on the reality of the convents themselves. While "everything we know about English convents on the Continent suggests that nuns worried about money, struggled with language problems, fought about doctrine, and did hard

or at least tedious physical work on an exhausting schedule” (Dolan 513), this is not the image that most people of the eighteenth-century had of convents, and this is what makes the character of the nun so successful. Protestants saw convents as places full of rebellious and even sexually deviant women and so did the Catholic Church. These are the images that the men in charge constructed, and these were the images that society was familiar with and generally believed. The Catholic Church was constantly trying to curtail the freedoms of the nuns because they believed that the women would not be able to handle this freedom and exploit it as a path to sexual deviance; after all, women cannot be expected to control themselves.

The Protestant church leaders feared young women who would choose to leave their country in order to join a convent were also choosing a life of defiance and sexual deviance because the natural state for women to exist in, ordained by god, was as a complacent reproductive vessel for their husbands. When interpreting the use of nuns and convents in literature, which is so prevalent in the eighteenth century, it is not all that important that the women who actually lived in convents worked and struggled on a daily basis in order to support themselves. What matters is that the men in charge of society saw these women having the freedom to work and support themselves as a threat and that women believed that “the convent offer[ed] a space in which women [could] engage in a religious community, thus avoiding an undesirable marriage or the complications that arose from negotiating gender politics with an incomprehensible partner” (McArthur 601). Of course to a woman who had been closely controlled by her male relatives her entire life and maybe even forced into an

undesirable marriage herself, this reality might have still held some appeal because it still involved making a choice for herself.

Viewing the Eighteenth-Century through a more Contemporary Lens

Stories about deviant nuns and young protestant women cruelly sent to a convent to atone for their sins against society are easy enough to find in 18th century literature. However, Behn and Haywood treated these elements very differently in their works. Unfortunately, as pointed out by Tiffany Potter in her essay "Historicizing the Popular and the Feminine," their works were given very little weight in society because they were not considered literature. Women wrote these works; therefore, they were "inherently associated with the popular" (Potter 9). The works of women were relegated to the "generic ghetto of amatory fiction" while "high or elite culture in the eighteenth-century defaults to the male" (9). Just as much of the popular fiction of today is associated with women and not given credence as culturally significant (such as romance novels and tabloids), amatory fiction of the eighteenth-century was labeled unimportant by the men of the time.

If women were the main consumers of something, then it was assumed that it was trivial. Alexander Pope once said that "the ancient poets are in one respect like many modern ladies; let an action be ever so trivial in itself, they always make it appear of the most importance" (qtd in. Potter 12). What was popular with women was relegated to the realms of low culture and given little consideration by the critics of the time. The works of women like Haywood and Behn were "widely consumed, though the fact that readers were primarily assumed to be women left these works outside the scholarly discussion of even the (only

marginally) higher-culture genre of the novel until the late twentieth century” (Potter 9). The works that were produced by these women were not even considered novels, let alone discussed in a critical manner until hundreds of years later, so their views of society were never examined in their own time, which means that any social commentary that women writers may have written into their works would have almost certainly been glossed over and ignored entirely.

Not only were the women authors not allowed to participate in the literary culture of their time in a meaningful way, but also women in general were not meant to take part in the production of the popular goods. In her book *The Poetics of Sexual Myth: Gender and Ideology in the Verses of Swift and Pope*, Ellen Pollack argues that the tradition of giving women pin money,

Received as a gift from her husband, albeit a gift guaranteed by contract and specifically designed for use in the purchase of personal accouterments of dress, pin money demonstrates by its very existence that the wife is a consumer rather than a producer both of goods and of money itself. (37)

Women were meant to be consumers of popular culture, and their participation in consumerism was trivialized by their limited and controlled roll in it. Women were allowed to consume goods because their husbands gave them an allowance, and they were meant to spend this money on womanly things such as clothes and accessories; therefore, whatever they bought with the money must have been a trivial item, otherwise their husbands would have obviously bought it for them.

These women had money to spend; however, it was assumed that whatever they bought was inherently unimportant; therefore, the books that they bought and read in large numbers were dismissed as well. Sometimes the matter of women's amatory fiction was even considered a matter for concern because

the concern as it emerges in conduct books and periodical essays is not so much that women might (or might not) educate themselves into making significant material or intellectual contributions as that they might indulge in decadence and expensive entertainments. The conceivable alternatives for women, in short, are not productivity and idleness; the idleness is casually assumed. (Pollack 38)

Not only was it assumed that fiction written for women had no intellectual content; it was also assumed that the women reading would not attempt to learn from it even if there was; rather, the only concern was that women would waste their husband's money over indulging in sensational literature.

This trivialization of women in general led to the trivialization of women's amatory fiction and the authors of it. Potter points out that it was a common belief that "when women read amatory fiction or consumed fashionable commodities, they demonstrated their shallowness of mind; the fact that these commodities are consumed by women similarly affirms their lack of importance as cultural and artistic products" (11). Women were meant to consume rather than produce, and they were only meant to consume frivolous products with no real market value. Women like Behn and Haywood were already challenging societal norms by writing, no matter what they wrote. It is for this reason that, according to Holly Luning's article "Writing Bodies in Popular Culture: Eliza Haywood and Love in Access," during the eighteenth-

century, “female authorship was widely considered to be the literary equivalent of prostitution” (150), and it was generally observed that “women did not, for the most part, offer military objection to the patriarchal status quo or the masculine typification of high culture” (Potter 5). At first glance, Haywood and Behn appear to be using the accepted patriarchal literary structure that was in vogue at the time, and therefore offering no real objection to it, but this is only because this is the only way that they were able to exist in the market place dominated by men like Pope who trivialized their participation even though their book sales rivaled his own.

The debate about whether or not popular culture is culturally relevant is still going on today. Many still argue, as they did in the eighteenth century, that what is popular does not constitute culture. As John Fiske says in his book *Understanding Popular Culture*, “the question at issue here is whether the mass media and popular culture debase our language or revitalize it” (85). What is known as pop culture theory has emerged relatively recently because of societies tendency to dismiss what is popular as outside of the realm of high culture. Fiske argues that modern pop culture main stays such as tabloids are important because they have “developed a form of language that enables various oral cultures to find resonance between it and their own speech patterns, and to find pleasure in relating the two. It achieves this largely through its departure from the official written language” (86). Because some works are dismissed as outside the realm of “real” written culture, they are able to use language in a way that is relatable to marginalized peoples within a culture.

Today this has more socio-economic implications, but in the eighteenth-century women often existed within the same socio-economic sphere as the men who controlled the gates to high art, but they were excluded from it despite their similar status. Because of women’s

“essentially passive role as a reproductive vessel and an ornament to man” they received no authority from their social class beyond what they could receive indirectly via their husbands (Pollack 58). Women who were married to wealthy socially important men were only important because of their ties to these men; they had no societal value of their own and no claim to any power; their husbands held powerful positions and received land, power, and influence while the women were lucky to receive pin money. In the case of eighteenth-century women writers, the only departure they make from the official written language is that in their case, men were not doing the writing, but in the eighteenth century that was enough. Women readers for the first time had books that were written in a voice that was much closer to their own even though it was filtered through an imitation of a male voice which the market required.

Jane Milling points out in her article “Working in the Theater; Women Playwrights, 1660-1750,” that these writers were singled out because of their sex, but also more specifically because “their gender had limited their access to education and other literary qualifications” (16). Despite the fact that women traditionally served as governesses, because “they were not admitted to institutions of higher education, they were equipped to teach only the most elementary levels” (Pollack 31). Therefore, even the most educated of woman was not considered educated enough to compete in the literary market with the male writers who had had access to these institutes of higher learning. According to Spencer, Behn “present[ed] the female narrator as authoritative, disinterested, and sympathetic, with as much authority as a male writer and also with special insights gained from her woman’s position” (51). Men certainly established their narrators as authoritative, but it was this special insight into the women characters that Behn added that was seen as trivial because it generally included

emotional insights or insights into women that were seen as unimportant. However, critical theories such as Fiske's give us a way to reclaim the importance of these works without having to argue that they are like the works of the men at the time because to lump them together is to ignore their distinct and interesting differences.

The work of the women of the eighteenth-century is similar to the pop culture literature of today in that it tends to be excessive, and it is this excess that Fiske sees as important. If looked at through this lens, Behn and Haywood's works are interesting and worthy of merit because of their differences from the other works written by their male counterparts rather than their similarities because it was the differences that allowed the women readers to connect to the literature in a more meaningful way. According to Fiske, "popular culture tends to be excessive, its brush strokes are broad, its colors bright. This excessiveness invites its denigrators to attack it as 'vulgar,' 'melodramatic,' 'obvious,' 'superficial,' 'sensational,' and so on" (91). Which is certainly the case with works of amatory fiction, which were often dismissed as sensational, trivial, and vulgar.

In the worlds created by Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood, actions, appearances, and emotion all seem to be magnified. Belinda of Haywood's *The British Recluse*, is not just pretty; "Heaven never formed a Creature more exactly lovely" (157). When Lysander first meets Cleomira, he declares that what he "feels for [her] bursts out and blazes too fierce to be concealed" (165). Similarly Cleomira is not just flattered or shocked; she feels "Surprise, and Joy, and Hope, and Fear, and Shame at once" (165). All of the emotions that the characters feel are so extreme that they cannot be summed up in just one emotion. In fact, when Cleomira realizes that Lysander has left her for another woman and has no intention of returning "the

Horrors of [her] mind had such an influence over [her] Body that it was impossible [she] should be able to bring a living Child into the World” and she miscarries her baby (188). The emotions that the women of Haywood’s stories feel are so excessive, that they often manifest themselves physically.

In *Fantomina*, the unobservant Beausplaisir never suspects that all of the different women that he sleeps with are in fact the same woman. Beausplaisir has intimate physical relationships with the same woman disguised as 4 different women, yet he never suspects that any of these women have anything in common. This story, in addition to utilizing excessive emotions, also exhibits an excess of seductive encounters. Instead of the would be seducer triumphing over his intended target and then leaving her, as with Cleomira and Belinda in *The British Recluse*, the young woman of this story goes about seducing and being seduced three more times until she is finally required to give up her pursuit because she is pregnant. This is so outlandish that even the narrator remarks on the unbelievable nature of the situation, insisting that the young woman without a name is “so skilled in the Art of feigning, that she had the Power of putting on almost what Face she pleased”(238), yet the narrator acknowledges that “there are Men who will swear it is an Impossibility and that no Disguise could hinder them from knowing a Woman they had once enjoyed” (238). Making it clear that Fantomina is either an excessively skilled actress of inhuman capabilities, or Beausplaisir is excessively gullible.

Similarly, in Behn’s *The History of the Nun*, Isabella, like so many other women in amatory fiction, finds that she simply cannot live without her love Henault, and she fears that having to live with this “despairing love” will “reduce her to madness” (16). In addition to once again highlighting these exaggerated feelings, Isabella’s circumstances quickly escalate until the

situation is unbelievably desperate. Poor, virtuous, well-meaning Isabella not only manages to accidentally marry two men, she also, through a series of desperate events, kills both of them in the same night. However, the reader is still led to believe that Isabella manages to maintain her saintliness all the way through her executions after which “she was generally lamented and honorably buried” (42). Not only is Isabella’s story outlandish, the common people’s reaction to it is also unbelievable. Despite the fact that she was a bigamist and a murderess in the eighteenth-century, she was still lauded as an example to young women and given a decent burial. Despite the actions that have condemned her as a vow-breaker and a murderess, Isabella is so excessively good that the general populace is completely unable to think badly of her. She so strongly exemplifies society’s ideal young woman—beautiful, humble, obedient—that even when she is forced into unbelievably awful situations, she still maintains her saintly appearance. By doing this Behn forces the reader to wonder, if Isabella is so good that she cannot possibly be completely to blame for her actions, who is? The inevitable answer is the society that pushed her to these extremes.

Behn’s *The Rover* is an example of excess at its finest. The story takes place in Naples during carnival (156). So the characters are literally running the streets masked and costumed randomly meeting at the most opportune and inopportune moments throughout the play. The streets of Naples are so chaotic that the character Florinda is actually almost raped twice in the course of the play. The first time Willmore discovers her in her nightdress waiting outside her garden for the man she intends to elope with, Belvile; fortunately, Belvile is in time to save her (203). She is attacked again by Blunt as she runs into his house because she is trying to escape her brother. She tries to explain her situation to Blunt, but he declares that he will “kiss and

beat [her] all over; kiss and see [her] all over; [she] shall lie with [him] too, not that [he] cares for the enjoyment, but to let [her] see that [he] have taken deliberate malice to [her] and will be revenged on one whore for the sins of another” (225-6). Florinda even mentions that she met Belvile when he was saving her from soldiers who were trying to rape her—which means that in the time that she has know Belvile, he has saved her from being raped three times—two of them in the same night. Although *The Rover* is generally considered a comedy, it fluctuates between playful and dark at what is often an alarming rate.

As the narrator comments on the excessive nature in *Fantomina*, in Behn’s *The Rover*, Helena remarks on the excess of emotion expressed by the men of the play when Willmore declares that if she does not sleep with him he will be “a dead man” (170). Helena replies “Why must we be either guilty of fornication or murder if we converse with you men” (170). According to men like Willmore, women are either giving into men’s desires or physically harming them. However, the women of the eighteenth-century were expected to hide their emotions and desires and remain chaste until marriage, but the men, who will face no consequences from seducing the women, are willing to exaggerate their distress when the women attempt to remain chaste even though the same men would see the woman as ruined and unsuitable for marriage if she were to give in. This double standard was generally accepted without question; however, in this instance, Helena questions it. While it is very true that the emotions and actions of Behn and Haywood’s character are excessive, it is also true that they seems to be aware of this excess, and even remark on it. This turns the theme of excess from just a characteristic the works have in common, to a tool that the authors are aware of and using intentionally.

This excess is also present in other works of the time such as the story of the poor unhappy nun Eliza, who, unable to escape the convent to join her love, not only kills herself, but she does so in one of the most violent ways possible: by slitting her own throat. This desperate act certainly demonstrates an excess of emotion; however, at no time in the story does the narrator or any of the characters remark on this excess of emotion, so it is presented as something that is completely normal. By meeting this normal level of excess and exceeding it, Behn and Haywood's works do something new in that they point out the excesses and make them look ridiculous. By making these excessive emotions look ridiculous, they leave them open to criticism. This gave women of the time a venue to examine what was expected of them. Furthermore, this is why the nun characters were so particularly effective. Rather than only focusing on women who were controlled by a male society, these works focused on the women who were often assumed to be more controlled than anyone: the women who gave their lives up to the Catholic Church.

This observation is particularly interesting when considered along with Fiske's ideas of pop culture theory. Fiske proposes that this is important because norms that are exceeded lose their invisibility, lose their status as natural commonsense, and are brought out into open agenda. Excess involves elements of the parodic, and parody allows us to make them conversational, to evade the ideological thrust, to turn its norms back on themselves. (92)

By exploring cultural norms through the use of excess, what was perceived as the normal role of women, —namely, the idea that women could not possibly be happy without the constant guidance of a man—Behn and Haywood are speaking to the women who may have disagreed

with ideas such as this at the time, even if they were unable to criticize this social norm directly. The works of Behn and Haywood go just one step farther than the usual literature of the time in that they seem to be aware of this excess, and, once this is acknowledged openly, the story becomes more of a parody than a romance.

Therefore, more than just being “an escapist fantasy bringing some unusual stimulation into the drabness of the everyday . . . they enables those whose sexual relationships ‘fail’ to accord with the romantic ideology of the ‘normal’ couple to question the norms rather than their own experience” (Fiske 92). Behn and Haywood focus quite a bit on the idea of women who are able to overcome the expectations placed on them by society. Helena is able to avoid her fate as both a nun and an unhappy wife, manages to choose her own husband, and convince her sister to do the same. Isabella, despite being forced into a terrible situation by societal expectations, is able to retain her appearance of a saint. Fantomina manages to keep the interest of her fickle lover until such a time that she escapes what she predicts would be an unhappy marriage and goes to live in a convent with other women who were cast out of society. Finally, Belinda and Cleomira are able to escape society entirely, bypassing the flimsy retreat of the convent—which is still ultimately overseen by men—and live out the rest of their days happy in each other’s company.

In his book, Fiske is speaking about modern tabloid magazines and their portrayal of relationships; however, his observations about tabloid’s role in society can also be easily applied to amatory fiction: the pop culture icon of the eighteenth-century. Because the situations that the authors present are always excessive, and the characters of the nun are

particularly apt for displaying this excess, they exceed the norms which allow women who do not meet these norms to consider their own positions within society.

Women and Writing in the Eighteenth Century

History often fails to acknowledge that women were writing their own histories since the Middle Ages. In fact, according to Isobel Grundy's article, "Women's History? Writings by English Nuns," "women's history before the nineteenth century—history written about, or by, or for women—is generally assumed to be nonexistent, a classic absence or silence.

Examination, however, shows that the presumed absence is merely an absence of what we have mistakenly expected to find" (126). Although women were not widely writing large toms of history, they were very prolific writers of personal documents. This of course led to the assumption that "women's writing is mere fancy, entirely removed from the masculine realms of nature and history" (Potter 10). Nuns in particular were prolific writers, but their works were not related to the patriarchal idea of histories because their stories recorded "a quest for specifically female community," so these were dismissed or completely overlooked (Grundy 127). Instead of cataloguing the deeds of great men, these women were recording what their everyday life was like, which included the workings of a household, rather than the world, and the daily minutia that went with it, which was, because it had to do with the lives of women, deemed trivial. Even when women were writing about the lives of other women, men sometimes edited their works. When a noble woman named Lady Falkland died, her daughter, who was a writer in her own right, and her brother who was a poet, Patrick Cary, wrote her biography, but Cary edited many of the passages that his sister wrote because he considered

them “too feminine” (127). Women were even expected to sound less “feminine” when they were writing about themselves and other women.

Women who wrote about themselves and other women were still expected to adhere to the prescribed masculine tone. This explains why Haywood and Behn were so circumspect in their pro-woman attitude and possibly why they chose nuns as primary characters so often. Women who wrote in their own voice about things that mattered to them, were dissenters, and “English writing nuns were outsiders several times over; they transgressed national imperatives in adhering to prescribed religion, gender imperatives of fertility and helpmeet status in choosing enclosure (which also meant almost certain exile), and an additional gender taboo in writing” (127). This is one of the reasons that it is so interesting that writers like Haywood and Behn chose to use nuns and convents so often in their works. As noted earlier, women writers were often equated with prostitutes, another group of women who were ostracized because of their sexual deviance. Nuns and women authors were both looked upon as outsiders, and nuns were some of the first writers in English culture, although their works were not acknowledged on a critical level until much later, like the works of Behn and Haywood. However, both groups of women continued to write despite the fact that their works were mostly omitted from the circles of higher culture.

Some nuns eventually became well known for their works, such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kent; however, there were many English nuns living in exile who wrote works of “biography, autobiography and chronicles of their communities” which essentially comprised “a history of a whole female culture” (Grundy 126). This may have been why Haywood chose to use the convent so often as an idyllic setting in her novels; an environment where women were

free to write for other women without having to seek the approval of men might have had a particular appeal to a female writer. Haywood and the nuns were both representations of groups that were often shunned from correct society. In eighteenth-century society, women writers were often equated with prostitutes, while nuns were often portrayed in literature as “harsh and frustrated if not sadistic (with predatory lesbianism often part of the package)” (127). Writers and nuns were both portrayed in society as sexually deviant. Nuns who wrote seemed to be doubly so.

One sister who desired to write her story received permission from the abbot in charge of her convent; however, once she started writing he began to make “some very slighting expressions” about her work-in-progress, and insisted that “his permission was only a trial of her obedience and she must burn her story” (130). Despite the fact that he at first encouraged her to write her story, once she began he became verbally abusive about her lack of writing skills. She did burn her manuscript as instructed; however, shortly after she employed a “strategy used by female writers of many sects,” that is, she insisted that she was divinely inspired and so was writing “not as originator but as an ancillary to an unchallengeable power” (130). In order for her to be taken seriously as a writer, she had to claim that an anthropomorphic male god inspired her writing. However, this did allow her to “make her mark” on her community by “challenging (by indirection) the male authority within it for the right to tell her own story up to the point of entry into the communal history” (131). Here is where the reality of convent life had much in common with the British women authors of the time. To be taken seriously they both had to have, at the heart of their works, an essentially

male voice, and they were both subject to the approval of the men in charge of their spheres of publication.

Haywood portrays convents as a sort of retreat where women could escape the rule of a patriarchal society; however, the reality of convent life was that it was still “under the control of a male anthropomorphic god and male human superiors” (132). The women did get to live on their own, but they were still under the supervision of the male members of the church. However, this often did not enter into the fictional stories that eighteenth-century writers created. The nuns and convents of eighteenth century literature were often depicted “in an ahistorical viewpoint, which conflates or confuses the contemporary with the often distant past” (127). So, the common depictions of the convents were often not accurate; however, Haywood’s depictions were very different from others of the time. While the convents of *Eliza* and *Clementina* were full of cruel, violent older nuns and young women wishing for escape, Haywood insists that a community of women would be preferable to the society that many young women had been cast out of, and this might have been closer to the actual existence of many of the women in convents at the time.

The reality of the convent as presented by the writings of actual nuns seems to reflect this ideal to a certain degree because, despite the fact that they were over seen by men, the nun’s writings “were not written for the world but for each other” (Grundy 127). So, rather than reflecting a sense of competition or conflict, which is often portrayed in English literature about nuns, the nuns “find meaning and structure for their own narratives of their own lives by directing them towards an eventual merging of community history” (127). Rather than reflecting the stories of young beautiful women wishing to escape sadistic older abbesses, the

actual writings found in convents fostered a real sense of community among the women who wrote them, and from these different writings, these women formed a successful picture of the history of their own lives and their communities of women which was closer to the actual reality of convent life. Even when the men of the church enforced reforms such as clausura, “most chapters refused to be ‘reformed’” (Sperling 115), so the idea that these women were rebellious and capable of making their own decisions was at least somewhat true.

Outside of the female communities, writing was ruled by the strict gender expectations that ruled the rest of society. There was even a code of acceptable conduct that pertained to letter writing. Women of the eighteenth-century were particularly prolific letter writers. However, their conduct in the letters they wrote was just as well monitored and criticized as their public conduct. Earla Wilputte points out in her essay, “‘Paper Cannot Blush’: Martha Fowke, and the Eighteenth-Century Abandoned Woman,” that it was as “inappropriate for a woman to write to a man as to speak with him clandestinely. The danger of a woman’s writing was that she might reveal too much of her heart in an unguarded moment” (45). This was completely unacceptable because “women were expected to conceal their amorous interests in order to secure a man’s esteem and affection” (Luhning 157). The implication being that if women hoped to remain eligible for an advantageous marriage, they needed to remain chaste, and “Chastity was a comprehensive virtue embodying a complex ideal of female behavior that extended far beyond the literal avoidance of illicit sex” (Pollack 68). Chastity meant they had to remain chaste in their thoughts and in their conduct, which did not just include having sex; instead, it included any conduct viewed as even suggestive up to and including letter writing.

In *Eliza or the Unhappy Nun*, Eliza finds that her correspondences with her beloved are her undoing when the evil Abbess discovers them. When the Abbess finds Eliza's letters, which very clearly talk of her love and her intentions to run away from the convent, the Abbess has Eliza locked in a dungeon for "the horrid crime of conversing with a man" (24). Young women of the eighteenth-century were expected to appear indifferent to a man in order to secure his interest; therefore, accidentally expressing too much emotion in a letter would destroy their chances of securing the man's regard and ruin her chances of marriage. The danger was not only that he would find her exhibition of emotion undesirable but also that she would be harshly judged by society once it became publicly known that she had divulged her emotions in what was perceived as a very intimate manner.

Men were not the only ones who expressed this opinion that women were expected to hide their feelings about men. Eliza Haywood even asserted once that "'Paper cannot blush,' and without the guardianship of virtue's 'natural Bashfulness,' women could take great liberties in expressing themselves" (Wilputte 45). This remark is particularly interesting because it comes from one of the first women ever to make a living at writing professionally. It was assumed that women should not write to men personally because they were likely to give away their feelings in an unplanned burst, which may have been why women who wrote were often associated with whores. In short, "the ideal presented to women in manner books of the age. . . was one of cultivated passivity" (Pollack 42) Therefore, the revelation of emotions through a letter ran counter to the social ideal of womanhood. Furthermore, if it was true that a woman could give away too much of her passion in a letter then what might she give away during the course of an entire story. Haywood and Behn both often used letter writing as a literary device.

In Haywood's *Fantomina*, the young woman exchanges letters often with her lover Beauplaisir, and according to this social stricture, gives away entirely too much. When she writes to him each time as a different woman, she tells him unequivocally that he "is the greatest charm in Nature to [her] sex. . .[and] that [she is] infinite in love with [him]" (242). She is seemingly unable to withhold her feelings and this delights him at first, eliciting replies that "Never was woman formed to charm like you; Never did any look like you— —write like you,— — bless like you,— —nor did ever Man adore as I do" (239). Although he, despite these professions, is apparently able to keep his true feelings in reserve because as he is writing this letter to the young woman, he is writing another to someone who he believed to be a different person, but is in fact the same woman. In his second letter, he professes to her that "If you were half so sensible as you ought of your own Powers of charming, you would be assured, that to be unfaithful or unkind to you, would be among the things that are in their very Nature Impossibilities" (239). Beauplaisir is playing both of these women falsely and assuming that he is the one in control because he believes that the young ladies are incapable of doing anything in these letters but revealing her hearts desires. However, Haywood once again challenges this assumption because Beauplaisir is not actually deceiving these two women because they are, in fact, one woman who is deceiving him.

Isabella of Behn's *The History of the Nun* also had troubles with miscommunications in letters. When she is made to go out into society before she takes her vows to make sure that being a nun is what she really wants, she meets a young man Villenoy, who when she returns to the convent claims to be dying of love for her (9-10). She is distressed at this news, and acknowledges to herself "she had given him hope by answering his letters" (10). This seems to

be playing on the assumption that if a young woman writes to a young man that she must be helplessly in love with him; however, this stereotype of the time once again is slightly skewed when Villenoy realizes that Isabella was not actually returning his love, she was just returning his letter.

Unlike the women like Eliza whose letters clearly revealed their hearts at their own peril, Behn and Haywood's character's letters obscure and manipulate their perceptions, intentionally or unintentionally, and this is possible at least in part because of the assumption that women who wrote letters were sure to reveal their hearts desires in their writing, again slightly distorting the accepted paradigm for eighteenth-century literature. This makes Haywood's remarks about women needing to guard their natural bashfulness while writing almost laughable, since her characters, like the young woman in *Fantomina*, were not only able to hide their emotions in their writing, but to manipulate the emotions of the men that they were writing to. This once again reinforces the idea that these characters were not different because they were headed for a convent; they were different because they were women who distorted the acceptable gender norms.

Conclusion

It is assumed that "nuns and nunneries were generally depicted by those outside the convent walls, from Restoration dramatists and fiction writers to sentimental novelists and romantic poets, all according to chiefly anti-Catholic and sexist stereotypes" (Grundy 127); however, Haywood's depictions of convents as utopic societies where women could escape the strictures of a patriarchal power structure may have been closer to the truth than the demonized depictions generally offered by eighteenth-century authors. Furthermore, Behn's

nuns, while still seeming to adhere to these stereotypes, were criticizing much more than the Catholic Church. Women were trivialized to the point of dehumanization, and despite the fact that they had recently gained the right to inherit property; they were largely treated as property themselves. It is often assumed that the women of the time did not object to their status as reproductive vessels; however, these works show the beginnings of a community of women who were actively questioning their roles in society and exploring other roles that were being made available to them.

Behn and Haywood exploit not only the contemporary visions of nuns and convents but also the established writing styles and archetypes of their time in order to make a case against patriarchal control and the established patterns of women's lives. The stock character of the nun and the looming setting of the convent were two of the established patterns that Haywood and Behn made use of in their works. They use these characters and settings not to criticize the Catholic Church, as it may seem at first, but actually to criticize the treatment of women in general. This criticism included the Catholic Church, but only in so much as they criticized the role of the Catholic church in the subjugation of women. Because the nun was such an extreme example of women abstaining from society and marriage, she " makes it possible to explore not only reservations about extreme constraints and impossible expectations placed on most if not all women, but also the apprehension that some women might seek out or require even more extreme forms of constraint" (Dolan 514). Because nuns were such an extreme example of female autonomy for the time, they were useful tools to examine the equally ridiculous constraints placed on everyday women of England because by exploring these constraints and exceeding the way they were usually depicted, Behn and Haywood make these restraints

placed on women of the time visible and shed light on something that was previously glossed over because it was considered normal.

If the nun's life was such an extreme example of female life and marriage can be reasonably compared to life in a nunnery, then what does that mean for the institute of marriage? Furthermore, if life for women is full of unrealistic expectations then wouldn't life away from the society that creates these expectations be infinitely simpler? Nuns were generally seen as a problem in eighteenth century England and elsewhere, and this was not just a reflection of Catholic women monastics; it was a reflection of the general opinion of all women of this time and their trivialized role in society. Otherwise, English monks would have received similar treatment. Because this was such a well-established public opinion, Behn and Haywood are able to use the tools of this argument, namely the character of the nun and the setting of the convent, to criticize the masculine expectations of women of their time. However, this has largely escaped public notice because of the exile of women's fiction from the realm of high culture. Women's role in society as trivial led to the assumption that works written by women, for women, and about women could hardly be anything but trivial themselves; therefore, the works of fiction written by women in the eighteenth-century were critically ignored for centuries and are just recently being considered as culturally significant.

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