

**“SUPPLYING THE DEFAULTS OF NATURE BY THE INDUSTRY OF ART”:
NATURA, ARS AND EXERCITATIO IN APHRA BEHN'S *THE DUMB VIRGIN*;
OR, THE FORCE OF IMAGINATION**

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RESUMEN

Trabajo que investiga los conceptos de *natura* y *ars* a partir de *The Dumb Virgin*. Se deduce la consciencia creadora de la autora a partir de los conceptos de mimesis y de representación mostrando su conocimiento de teorías poéticas, así como su plasmación en este relato mediante una protagonista que siendo muda es una habilidosa pintora, complementada por su hermana que siendo deforme tiene una brillante elocuencia.

Palabras claves: *The Dumb Virgin*, pintura, naturaleza, arte.

ABSTRACT

It investigates the concepts of *natura* and *ars* that inform Behn's *The Dumb Virgin*. It is highlighted the poet's artistic conscience, in terms of mimesis and representation, revealing the author's knowledge of poetical theories, as well as their implementation in the story through a protagonist who, while unable to speak, is a masterful painter, further complemented by the protagonist's sister, who is deformed but eloquent.

Keywords: *The Dumb Virgin*, painting, nature, art.

In the seventeenth century, the effects of a profound political and social struggle were widely evident. Such instability had made its mark on the concept of literature questioning of the nature of it and giving rise to the proliferation, towards the end of the sixteenth century, of apologies and attacks centred around the subject of poetry¹.

Aphra Behn's work echoes the literary conflicts and controversies as regards poetics such as *ars* and *natura*. It is in this atmosphere of questioning the aim of literature and the status of the author, of reflection on the act of creation, that the subject of this present article is based, focusing on *The Dumb Virgin: or, the Force of Imagination* (1689). Aphra Behn was a pioneering professional writer in the English world, who

¹ Examples of these writers are George Puttenham (*Art of English Poesy*, 1589), Sir Philip Sidney (*Defense of Poesy*, 1595) continuing later with Samuel Daniel (*Defense of Rhyme*, ca. 1603), Ben Jonson (*Timber, or Discoveries*, 1641) and even John Dryden himself ("The Author's Apology for Heroic Poetry and Heroic License", 1667; *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, 1668).

made remarkable progress in the theatrical genre, reaching a level of popularity comparable to that of the renowned professional writer John Dryden, during the time of the Restoration.

On a purely theoretical level there have been studies made on this theme; however there is no evidence that they were applied to the literary techniques of this particular *novella* by the academics who carried them out, among whom it is worth mentioning Phelps (1950), Gardiner (1980, 1989), Craft-Fairchild (1993), Laurie Finke (1993), Todd (1996), Robitaille (1997), Nussbaum² (2003), Pearson (1988, 2004) and Figueroa-Dorrego (2000, 2003). *The Dumb Virgin* is a text that has been subjected to little critical analysis, and there appear to be very few articles (Robitaille, 1997) devoted exclusively to it.

The two shortcomings that represent the protagonists of this story summarize the difficulties of women in society. On the one hand, Maria's inability to speak is a metaphor for "the lack of social power accorded to women" (Pearson, 2004: 200). On the other hand, Belvideera's visible deformity is not a handicap to relate to other people in highborn society. In fact, they both go to a masked ball held by the dukes in celebration of a recent military success.

Regarding the various sections of this study, we will examine the exceptional case of Maria who, having been born mute, possesses a quite unprecedented and admirable level of intelligence. We will also mention the complementary relationship between Maria and her sister Belvideera who is physically deformed and eloquent. This will allow us to explore more deeply the concepts of *ars* and *ingenium* both in the *ordo artificialis* and the *ordo naturalis*. The article will examine the comparison between two forms of representation, namely pictorial and poetic ("ut pictura poesis"). It will be shown how the two sisters embody this Symonidean and Horatian duality; one being deformed and eloquent (eloquent painting) and the other beautiful and mute (mute poetry). Lastly, this correlation will allow us to draw conclusions about Behn's universal conception of art, whereby she considers that *ars* and *exercitatio* compensate for the congenital defects caused by nature.

If, as a general rule, nature is seen as having the decisive influence on works of art and individuals, Behn rebels against this presupposition. Instead, she prefers to focus on

² Nussbaum (2003: 28-29) considers the central episode on which this article is based.

how to counteract said determinism³, how to offer an alternative to the defects presented by nature, in short, how to manipulate nature with art. Her originality and courage are admirable when seen in the light of other earlier writers, such as Cervantes in his prologue to *Don Quijote* who claims that "I could not counteract Nature's law"⁴ (Cervantes, 2005: 7).

1. A POET IS A PAINTER IN HIS/HER WAY⁵: ASPECTS OF SIMONIDEAN AND HORATIAN DUALITY IN THE TWO SISTERS

In the prologue to *Oroonoko; or The Royal Slave* Aphra Behn compares the ontology of pictorial work with that of literary creation, illustrating -by way of a comparison- the equivalences that support both the legal as well as the economic statuses of both groups of creators. In fact, a reading of Behn's best-known work reveals a clear correlation between the painter and the poet. In the inscription to *Oroonoko*, Behn defines the artist in these terms, addressing the recipient of the letter, the Jacobite Richard Maitland, fourth Earl of Lauderdale:

My Lord, a picture drawer, when he intends to make a good picture, essays the face many ways, and in many lights, before he begins, that he may choose from the several turns of it which is most agreeable and gives it the best grace; and if there be a scar, an ungrateful mole, or any little defect, they leave it out; and yet make the picture extremely like. But he who has the good fortune to draw a face that is exactly charming in all its parts and features, what colours or agreements can be added to make it finer? All that he can give is but its due; and glories in a piece whose original alone gives it its perfection. An ill hand may diminish, but a good hand cannot augment its beauty. A poet is a painter in his way; he draws to the life, but in another kind; we draw the nobler part, the soul and mind; the pictures of the pen shall outlast those of the pencil, and even worlds themselves (Behn, 1994: 26).

This is no chance incursion into the world of art and portrait painting. Behn has in mind the concept of "ut picture poesis"⁶, which was the subject of many theoretical treatises published over the years that dealt with the matter of artistic and literary creation. The writer references the poet Julius Caesar Simonides (5th century B.C.E.) through the concept that "painting is silent poetry, poetry eloquent painting". This

³ In this respect the writer presents her views against predestination, a fundamental doctrine of the protestant religion.

⁴ The original text is: "no he podido yo contravenir al orden de la naturaleza" (Cervantes, 2005: 7). The translated text is quoted from John Ormsby, 1885 *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*, London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1.

⁵ This is a modified quote from Behn's *Oroonoko*, in the epistle "To the Right Honourable the Lord Maitland", where Behn (1994: 3) proclaims that "A Poet is a Painter in his way".

⁶ The concept, as formulated by Symonides, can be read in *Arte poetica*, specifically verses 361-365: "Ut picture poësis: erit quae, si propius stes, / Te capiat magis; et quaedam, si longius abstes: / Haec amat obscurum, volet haec sub luce videri, / Judicis argutum quae non formidat acumen: / Haec placuit semel; haec decies repetita placebit", Sidney (2002: 86) determines it to be "a speaking picture".

declaration was written by Plutarch (1878, I, 50) in *Morals* in these terms: "We first describe poetry [...] and tell [...] that it is an imitating art and doth in many respects correspond to painting; not only acquainting him with that common saying, that poetry is vocal painting and painting silent poetry", and "Though indeed Simonides calls painting silent poetry, and poetry speaking painting" (Plutarch, 1878: V, 402)⁷. This also calls to mind Scaliger's understanding of poetry, who echoed Horace's⁸ perspective, particularly concerning the topic of imitation:

What is called Poesy describes not only what exists, but also nonexistent things as if they existed, showing how they could or should exist. For the whole matter is comprehended in imitation. But imitation is only the means to the ultimate end, which is to teach with delight [...] Poetry and the other arts represent things as they are, as a picture to the ear (Scaliger I, I, 2.6).

Scaliger (IV, I, 401) gets closer to the heart of the matter when he argues that "All discourse consists of idea, image, *mimesis*, just as all painting does: that is what Aristotle and Plato⁹ affirm". Aristotle (1996: 42) states that "the poet is engaged in imitation, just like a painter or anyone else who produce visual images".

Geographically and chronologically closer to the author, the works of Sidney and Jonson can be mentioned. In *An Apology of Poetry* (1595) Sidney¹⁰ makes the claim that "Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his Word *mimesis*, that is to say, representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth – to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture – with this end, to teach and delight" (Sidney, 2002: 86).

⁷ The idea is also in *On the Fame of the Athenians* (3), *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* (15) and *How the Young Man Should Study Poetry* (15), cited by R. W. Maslen (2002: 143; note19).

⁸ Horace, *The Art of Poetry. An Epistle to the Pisos*, line 361.

⁹ Regarding the necessary attributes of an orator, Plato lists *phýsis*, *knowledge* and *practice*. Aristotle (1996: 31) separating the poet from the orator, claims that the former must have inspiration, and as such he dissociates rhetoric from poetry. Protagoras, Cicero, Quintilian and Plato follow the same pattern. Protagoras (Cicero, *De Oratore*) establishes the three qualities of the poet *asphýsis*, *techne* and *exercitatio*. Cicero explores more deeply into the triad. *Natura* offers the capacity for public discourse, allowing for memory and mental fecundity. This is an innate talent which, although not generated by art, can in fact be cultivated (Cicero, i, 25). With regard to *ars*, Cicero alludes to the collection of inherited rules and precepts which cannot be ignored, following the conscious observation of specific models (Cicero, i, 32). Lastly, *exercitatio* refers to constant practice, as a means of instruction (Cicero, i, 34-37). The same approach is taken by Quintilian who defines the matter in the following terms: "Facultas orandi consummatur natura, ars, exercitacione" (iii, 5. 1).

¹⁰ The Elizabethan poet classifies "eloquent painting" in three distinct groups. The first emulates divine perfection (such as, for example, the *Psalms* of King David); the second recreates philosophical concerns, be they moral or natural in nature (Phocilides, Lucretius or Virgil), while the third is made up of the community of true poets, those who merit the name *vates*: "so these are waited on in the excellentest languages and best understandings, with the foredescribed name of poets; for these indeed do merely make to imitate, and imitate both to delight and teach" (Sidney 2002: 87).

Sidney holds the belief that the philosopher is an educator¹¹, and that his doctrine is only intelligible to the most learned among men; on the other hand, the poet (food for even the most sensitive stomachs) is defined as a philosopher of the people. This was arguably the motivating force that compelled Aphra Behn to take up her pen, and as an artist uses their brush, to commit herself wholeheartedly to her work¹²: "But the poet is the food for the tenderest stomachs, the poet is indeed the right popular philosopher, whereof Aesop's tales give good proof; whose pretty allegories, stealing under the formal tales of beasts, make many, more beastly than beasts, begin to hear the sound of virtue from these dumb speakers" (Sidney, 2002: 92).

In order to study Sidney properly we must also delve into the *Poetices libri septem* (1561) of Scaliger (Cano, 2003: 39) for whom literature was essentially a form of verbal "representation". Depiction was of primary importance, while the words themselves were relegated to a secondary status (Weinberg, 1931: 749). It cannot be known for sure whether Behn knew this Italian writer's work, but given the number of Italian references she makes in her writing it is perfectly possible. Along with Sidney, it is worth mentioning Ben Jonson. The Renaissance dramatist defined the poet in his 1641 work entitled "The Art of Poetry". His perspective echoes that of Sidney, as well as the classical tradition, particularly when he states that:

First, we require in our poet, or maker [...] a goodness of natural wit: for, whereas all other arts consist of doctrine and precepts, the poet must be able by nature and instinct to pour oyt the treasure of mind [...]. To this perfection of nature in our poet we require exercise of those parts, and frequent. [...]. The third requisite in our poet, or maker, is imitation: to be able to convert the substance or riches of another poet to his own use [...]. But that which we especially require in him is an exactness of study and multiplicity of reading [...] without art, nature can never be perfect: and without nature, art can claim no being (Jonson, 1953: 83-87).

This "dumb speaker" is one of the themes in this article, along with her sister. The correspondence between the views expressed by Sidney and Johnson and Behn's literary praxis is further confirmed by the versions of Aesop's fables she published.

It has been outlined that the two sisters embody the Symonidean/Horatian duality, since Belvideera is deformed yet eloquent while Maria is beautiful but mute. Belvideera lacks beauty with regard to *natura*, Maria is exceedingly beautiful in these terms.

¹¹ There is more evidence of this statement in other works such as "The Lucky Mistake: A New Novel" (1689), as the young Rinaldo is taught by renown tutors. Another illustration of this can be found in the same fiction, in the figure of Vernole, who teaches philosophy to Count de Pays's daughters, Atlante and Charlot.

¹² The letters wrote by Belvira and sent to Frankwill, in "The Unfortunate Bride", are good examples of this female determination. Another case in point is the letter wrote by Elvira for don Henrique in "The Nun; or the perjured Beauty".

Conversely, Maria lacks *locutio* by nature while Belvideera excels in *locutio*. Viewed together, the two comprise a divided yet complementary image of femininity, Maria symbolizing mute poetry while Belvideera represents eloquent painting.

Under these premises, literature is a form of imitation¹³, or mimesis. So it seems to follow that when Rinaldo's daughter takes up the paintbrush, she is in fact making a representation of herself - she is fictionalising herself. This suggests a degree of ambiguity to the reader. On the one hand she is herself worthy of imitation; on the other hand, it is she who completes the piece. Initially she is the object of mimesis; then she is the subject who creates the representation. Poetry and painting can be compared "relatively naturally" (Galí, 1999: 19).

2. A PROFICIENT IN PAINTING: "SITTING DOWN TO HER GLASS, FINISHED IT HERSELF"

The protagonist is remarkably gifted at painting. The narrator establishes this connection between Maria and pictorial art, she is reminded of a specific episode that she feels compelled to relate, pointing at the importance of this fragment, stating that it is "a remarkable story I can't omit" (345). It is a key excerpt whose meaning is revealing. The story involves the young girl and a renowned Italian painter, who was invited to the house by her father who wanted to have her portrait done. The artist makes two attempts to paint Maria but each time fails to finish, as when he comes to reproducing her gaze he is unsuccessful. The first time "the vivacity of her look so astonished the painter, that thro' concern he let his pencil drop and spoiled the picture" (345). On the second attempt he succeeds in making another sketch, but does not manage to complete it properly: "he made a second essay, but with no better success, for rising in great disorder, he swore it impossible to draw that which he cou'd not look upon" (345).

The protagonist, sitting for this famous Italian artist, becomes disappointed at his apparent lack of skill. She then sits in front of a mirror and takes it upon herself to finish the portrait: "The lady vexed at the weakness of the Painter, took up his pencils and the picture, and sitting down to her glass, finished it herself" (345). She alone, it seems, is

¹³ See Romà de la Calle 2005. "El Espejo de la *ekphrasis*. Más acá de la imagen. Más allá del texto. La crítica del arte como *paideia*". Eds. Ricard Huerta & Romà de la Calle. *La mirada inquieta. Educación artística y museos*. Valencia: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Valencia. 87-112.

capable of portraying herself. Maria paints her own image, indicating the female character’s “self-control” and “self-identity” (Craft-Fairchild, 1993: 51). And, importantly, the portrait is not completed by a man, but by a woman¹⁴. This act, as well as the girls’ attendance at the masquerade ball, is indicative of a growing crisis in “the old patriarchalism” (Prieto-Pablos 2012: 99) during the final years of the seventeenth century, which along with the crisis of absolutism, indicated a redefinition of the roles of the sexes. Equally, it brings to mind the idea of the “oppressive power of patriarchy” (Pearson, 1988: 150) and stands as a milestone in the depiction of the female sex. Maria refuses to be simply an object of art; she wants to be an active subject (Pearson, 1991: 48).

Within the field of pictorial art there is in fact a tradition surrounding eloquent mutism. A key example is the English professional artist Mary Beale (1633-1699), who, just as her namesake in *The Dumb Virgin*, also made portraits of herself. Beale was talented at portrait painting. Her passion for art surely came from her family, since her father (John Cradock) was a member of the Worshipful Company of Painter-Stainers in London. Another common feature that Beale shares with Behn is that her husband was also a merchant by trade¹⁵, if we are to trust the sources that refer to her supposed marriage. Beale devoted herself so intently to painting that she converted her house into a studio. Communication between the artist and the writer may have been possible at several stages in their lives, due to various contingencies; one example is the mutual friendship with Peter Lely, the king's painter, who had a profound impact on Beale's work. This creative link can be confirmed by analysing the resemblance of Aphra Behn's portrait, signed by Lely, compared with that of Mary Beale.

With this coincidence between the work of Beale and the literary context of Behn established, it is worth referencing three other portraits that seem to correlate with the story that we are presently examining. The first is “La Muta”, by Raphael, painted around 1507. The second is “Ritratto di giovanedonna (La Fornarina)” by the Renaissance artist Rafael Sanzio, painted towards the beginning of the 16th century. Lastly, we wish to include Leonardo da Vinci’s “Mona Lisa”, which was painted around

¹⁴ This fact becomes even more important when it is properly contextualized within the society of the time. Male supremacy and the essential irrelevance of women is also evident in other stories (Figueroa-Dorrego, 2000: 25-27), as in “The History of the Nun”. The protagonist occasionally has to rebel in order to fulfil her personal desires and exercise her own autonomy, as we see in Bellamora (“The Adventure of the Black Lady”) or in Arabella (“The Wandering Beauty”).

¹⁵ See Sackville-West (1927: 15), Goreau (1980: 70-97), Duffy (1988: 56-57) and Todd (1996: 67-79). More information on the literary profession can be found in the more specific study carried out by Pearson (1988).

the same time as “La Fornarina”. The episode which is the fundamental basis of this study may well have been modelled on the English painter Mary Beale, given their shared nationality, the artist’s contemporaneousness, and her status as a renowned female professional artist. These other references are part of a tradition that exemplify the subject and that may have influenced Behn’s treatment of these topics because it categorizes explicitly the female self-representation. Besides they do belong to the Italian culture so often depicted by Behn in her work¹⁶.

Returning to the field of literature, another telling example is the picture of Angelica in *The Rover* which embodies the woman’s self-identity and a female symbol of desire¹⁷ that Willmore, the Rover, took down from the balcony of the courtesan’s house. In fact, when Angelica asked him about his daring, Willmore replied with this question: “Rather, how durst you set it up, to tempt poor amorous Mortals with so much Excellence?” (Behn, 2012: II, ii). In this case, Angelica Bianca is the host of her destiny and consciously reaffirms her challenging occupation by means of the portraits. The picture becomes a vehicle portraying the female pride, the self-expression, the emancipation, the female value and the female beauty. This resounding and pictorial reaffirmation and self-control is also found in Maria’s self-depiction in the portrait.

Whereas the status of women at that time was relegated to a secondary- or even a tertiary - level of society and unable to participate in public affairs, the dumb Virgin paints herself marking the woman’s merit (the access to self-definition). Maria was unable to verbalise her thoughts, yet she is the paradigm of *ars* and *ingenium*, in Horatian terminology. Technique is identified with *ars*, and painting skills with *ingenium*. She is blessed with certain innate gifts, while also being technically proficient in other areas to an outstanding degree. While the protagonist is unable to speak, she is a masterful painter (silent poetry). While the women had no voice in the society in which they lived, Maria engraves her picture as long as Angelica announces and diffuses her image.

CONCLUSION

¹⁶ One example is in the aforementioned work entitled *The Rover. Or, The Banish’t Cavaliers* when the recently exiled monarchist Willmore arrives in Naples. Elements of Italian culture appear both in the names of the characters (Angelica Bianca, Lucetta) as well as in the setting of the scenes. This work was premièred on the 24th March 1677 in Dorset Garden, by the Duke’s Company, and was attended by Charles II himself.

¹⁷ In Act II, I, there are many references to Angelica’s picture, from the moment that two Bravoes enter to “hang up a great picture of Angelica’s, against the balcony, and two little ones at each side of the door”.

By employing these images, Aphra Behn shows herself to be no stranger to the long-standing debate that was in full flow during the Elizabethan period and the Restoration, regarding the relationship between *ars* and *natura*. With the addition of *exercitatio*, the third element incorporated into debates at the time, the trilogy was completed. *Mutatis mutandis*, in his *Novelas ejemplares* Cervantes expressed the view that: "my genius has engendered them [*natura*], my pen has brought them forth [*ars*], and they are growing up in the arms of the press [industry]"¹⁸ (Cervantes, 2010: 52), which once again reflects the emerging concept of the professional writer.

On this basis and under this paradigm, it is also worth recalling that Maria finished her own portrait, demonstrating her practical abilities and artistic skill. This deduction presents the reader with a semiotics of a meta-literary nature concerned with the principle of literature, the function of art and the role of the writer or painter. Brought to the realm of pure fiction, the reader encounters the characters of Maria and Belvideera, whose father Rinaldo had devoted his life to their education, in the hope of developing and refining their intellect and abilities, "stirring up his endeavours in supplying the defaults of Nature by the industry of Art" (344). The correlations mentioned reveal the important role of *exercitatio* as well as the intellectual roots of the *ordo naturalis* and the *ordo artificialis*.

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¹⁸ The original text is "mi ingenio las engendró, y las parió mi pluma, y van creciendo en los brazos de la estampa" (Cervantes, 2010: 52). The English translation is quoted from Walter, K. Kelly 1881. *The Exemplary Novels of Cervantes*. London: George Bell and Sons. 1.

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