

# Analyse 166) isabella believes this is a

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Analyse the representation of female criminality AND/OR subversive female behaviour in works studied on the module. This essay will explore how female criminality and subversive behaviour is represented within the novellas *The History of the Nun* and *The Fair Jilt*. The essay will analyse how and why the female heroines came to commit such crimes, and the aftermath of their actions.

It can be argued that crimes within the novellas are committed because of the harsh restraints assigned to women of the time period they were set. This essay puts forward the idea that within *The History of the Nun*, female criminality takes place because of the protagonist's desire to protect her reputation, and within *The Fair Jilt*, crime is represented as a way for the main female character to break away from the sexist gender roles by taking on more masculine characteristics. This essay will also explore the effect that violation of vows has on crime, and the punishment given after. Within *The History of the Nun*, Aphra Behn explores eighteenth century female desires. Behn designs Isabella, who incorporates 'conflicting versions of the perfect woman.' (Hultquist, 2015, pg 488) Isabella is both the virtuous nun who remains true to her vows, and also the lustful woman who desires a marriage. Behn purposely forms a situation in which Isabella's desires are not the issue. On the other hand, the patriarchal society's rules and expectations of women are what cause the problems.

Behn builds an environment where Isabella's complicity within the patriarchy ruins her, and the story concludes in frenzy, however, not without justice and pardon. As Isabella grows up, she falls in love with the handsome Henault. Isabella's emotions clash as she concurrently tries to suppress her feelings

for Henault and remain true to her vows. ' She tried fasting long, praying fervently, rigid penances and pains, severe disciplines, all the mortifications almost to the destruction of life itself, to conquer the unruly flame; but still it burnt and raged the more.

' (pg 166) Isabella suffers in silence; as her feelings for Henault torment her, she in return torments her body. However, her feelings grow stronger; the more she shows ' penance' the more her feelings ' raged.' Isabella eventually concludes that her growing feelings, even after her attempt at repression, must be approval from God: ' it was resisting even Divine Providence to struggle any longer with her heart.' (pg 166) Isabella believes this is a sign from God; his acceptance and forgiveness in breaking her religious vows. However, as suggested by Behn, breaking a law, or here a ' vow', is regarded as a sin (pg 139), and leads to revenge and punishment.

Therefore, here, Behn is emphasising how crime, especially crimes against Heaven, always ends in punishment. However, perhaps Behn is also emphasising the unfairness women were subjected to due to their lack of choice. Isabella is forced to choose between her lover and her vows; to follow her heart would be to break the laws of heaven.

Introducing her narrative in a monastery, Behn emphasises the outcome of violated laws to lovers and to God, but also 'emphasises that vow-breakers can avoid rash decisions about their fate' (Hultquist, 2015, pg 488) if ' nunneries and marriages were not entered into till the maid so destined were of a mature age to make her own choice.' (pg 141) Isabella was deemed suitable to make her decision when she was 13, and as having a ' virgin

innocence', Isabella does not understand the implication of her vows. Though Behn is condemning broken vows, 'the narrator emphasises the role that proper patriarchal protectors should play in a woman's life, especially when she is too young to understand or protect herself.' (Hultquist, 2015, pg 488) Therefore, Behn is emphasising how women who act out of line, whether that be law-breaking or an attempt to subvert their strict gender role, often has the patriarchal society to blame, and the women become victims to the patriarchy.

If Isabella's father had allowed her to wait until she was of age, she would have chosen Henault, and no vows would have been broken. However, this first event foreshadows the rest of the novel, and the horrors that follow. After Henault's presumed death through war, she remarries to an old suitor, Villenoy. Committed and devoted to her husband, Isabella, 'wanted nothing that could charm; so that she was esteemed the fairest and best of wives.' (pg 178) Isabella values the essence of her dedication over the actual commodity. Isabella's need for her two husbands, and for the approval of God and society become transgressive when they come to clash with the restrictions of the patriarchal society that suggest that women should not have desires. Furthermore, Isabella's love for her first husband come into conflict with the feeling of duty to her first.

When Henault returns, 'Shame and confusion filled her soul, and she was not able to lift her eyes up to consider the face of him whose voice she knew so perfectly well.' (pg 181) Isabella no longer loves Henault: 'she now only loved Villenoy.' However, she is entrapped by the clashing of society's rules.

Even though her love for Villenoy is greater than any feeling she still possesses for Henault, she cannot justly stay with her second husband after discovering her first husband is still alive. 'She has legal recourse, but a proceeding in court cannot remove the social stigma attached to bigamy, nor can it clarify her emotional confusion.' (Holquist, pg 490) Isabella is terrified of the shame this will bring onto her name: '...shame unimaginable (...) the scorn of the town, who will look on her as an adulteress.' (pg 181) Therefore, Isabella has to make a decision.

Similarly, the introduction to the novella held a decision for Isabella; she had to choose between her vows and love. Now, she must choose between her reputation and the devotion she has for her second husband. Helpless against her feelings, Isabella falls into a pit of misery, similar to which she experienced years ago when she had to choose between violating her vows and marriage. Isabella decides the act of murder is the only solution: "she resolved upon the murder of Henault, as the only means of removing all obstacles to her future happiness.' (pg 183) Isabella believes murder as her only option.

Because of the strict gender roles enforced on women, the importance of their behaviour, and the sympathy subjected to them, Isabella would rather murder her first husband, then, in a way, murder her reputation. In a sense, due to the strict gender role and the emphasis on a woman's role, Isabella feels as if she has no choice but to kill Henault. Isabella believes 'murder the least evil.' To her, committing murder is less evil than keeping him alive and facing the shame of being named an adulteress by society. Isabella commits

the murder in an attempt to reduce her desires and keep her social identity.’ Perhaps, Behn is placing part of the blame on the strict gender roles the patriarchal society enforces on women. If not for the suppression and lack of freedom women had, Isabella would not have had to break her vows in the first place, nor would she have had to worry about her reputation.

Therefore, Behn places part of the blame for crimes on the patriarchal society, perhaps emphasising how sometimes women are a victim to the patriarchy and are driven to commit such crimes. Due to Henault’s return, Isabella’s desires are beyond the authorised rules created to shield her. Her lack of ability to suppress her clashing emotions take the form of the murder of her two husbands. ‘Emboldened by one’s wickedness’, Isabella murders both her husbands to ensure her the safety of her reputation. Isabella admits to her actions immediately after the accusation she was the ‘murderess of two husbands (both beloved) in one night.’ The phrase ‘both beloved’ incorporates the issue of her ‘emotional absolutism.’ Because of her desire for both men, her contrasting emotions are dismissed as overdone and extreme.

Throughout her life, Isabella follows the role prescribed to her. She plays the virtuous role, and the devoted wife. However, Isabella’s attempt at accepting her desires and going against her assigned role, she faces harsh consequences. The conclusion of contrasts and conflict constructed into the roles assigned to women is psychological, as well as physical. However, Isabella dies as a woman of virtue, as shown through the description of her death: ‘everyone bewailed her misfortune.’ This final scene highlights the

contradiction of her death; she fails to accept her desires and societal rules because there is no room for a woman's ambition in society. Her wants and needs are implacable in the world of patriarchal ruling that create irreversible problems and conflicts for women. Therefore, it can be concluded, that because of the harsh suppression women are subjected to, they often are driven to unthinkable choices and decisions, and societal rules can often be a catalyst for crime committed.

On the other hand, within the Fair Jilt, crime is presented a way for females to incorporate more masculine features in an attempt to subvert the patriarchal society. Miranda, who takes the position of a temporary nun, falls for the handsome priest, Henrik. During a church service, Miranda ' put her Hand into her pocket, and was a good while searching for her Purse...at last he drew it out, and gave him a Pistole...while the good man, having received her bounty...proceeded to the rest.' (pg 81) This is the opposite of conventional sexual gender roles, and foreshadows a larger reversal of roles later on in the novella. ' Sexual roles are wholly reversed (...) Behn uses this reversal to mock a whole system of power which more usually manifests itself in male harassment of women.' The inversion of roles here becomes less about the subversion of male power and more about the grouping of women to question their assigned gender role and to present a different type of system and hierarchy. Miranda takes on a more masculine role within the novella. She becomes alive and effective, whereas Henrik remains inactive.

Miranda attempts to seduce Henrik, which leads to his rejection. His rejection is the catalyst that Miranda needs to falsely accuse Henrik of rape, which

causes his imprisonment: ' She elevated her voice so such a degree, in crying out: " Help, help. A rape.'" (pg 94) The inversion follows through, and Miranda has successfully incorporated male characteristics. Miranda ruins Henrik's name and reputation by accusing him of rape. Even though Miranda's is lying, she deceives everyone, and Henrik is almost put to death. Miranda uses the words of the patriarchal system in a reversal when her effort at force fails through. She uses this power she creates for herself to gain more power, and manipulate situations to her advantage.

Miranda moves on to marry Prince Tarquin, and after running out of money, attempts to kill her sister, Alcidiana. She persuades her page, Van Brune, to try and execute her sister, but this fails. Eventually, her husband, the prime Tarquin, tries and fails to kill her also.

' The failure that begins in the convent culminates in a failed execution, a metaphoric representation of the failures Behn's sees as inherent in societies that try to contain women.' (Goulding, pg 44) A duplicated theme is of a prevented action. This prevented action is repeated in the narrator's inability to write the novella as a moral fable. ' The narrator's voice questions and subverts this facile moral framework and creates a world more complex and disturbing in its ambiguities.' (Pearson.) The ' moral framework' is defective and Behn's power over the narrative emphasises that idea: Miranda remains unpunished because the society in which she lives would try to punish her because she was a woman.

Miranda is not a ' good' person, however, Behn created her show Miranda as someone who acts outside of the law, and in turn, breaks away from the



constraints of society. Therefore, Miranda breaks the law in order to shake off her the strict gender role the societal system has assigned her since birth. However, in contrast, Isabella within the History of the Nun put to death. Behn is suggesting that it is not necessarily the crime for her punishment, but the violation of her vows. 'The vows are inherently dangerous for Isabella because the narrator has led us to recognise that "' sins" sometimes occur because of circumstance.' (Goulding, pg 46) The monastery represents female suppression and entrapment to Isabella. Her desires are shown to be unimportant to the patriarchal society, which leads to her deadly crimes. It becomes clear to the audience that the societal system and suppression of women leads to sin by the violation of vows.

'The moral is, that without real choice, cannot take-or make-vows, and within the patriarchal system, there is no choice.' (Goulding, pg 47) The crimes that take place are the result of a patriarchal society that suppresses women so they are void of making their own choices. Because women are neglected the choice and freedom of men, this seems to prevent them from following moral codes. Although Miranda is described by her 'innocent by nature' (pg 181), she cannot break away from the suppression she is subjected to. Isabella becomes 'also a heroine' despite 'the loud proclamation of a moral purpose.' (Pearson.) What was introduced as a story about the consequences of violated vows, turned into a story of the effects of the patriarchal society.

Similarly, Miranda acts immorally through the entirety of *The Fair Jilt*.

However, the introduction begins with commemoration of love, as the 'most

noble and divine Passion of the Soul.’ (pg 75) Female fragility is responded with male weakness. The narrator becomes frankly moralising: ‘ the fair Hypocrite...the deceiving Fair.’ (pg 109) However, the irony throughout the novel questions the constant moralisation. Behn’s characters are in conflict; they do not know whether to choose the moral system that suppresses them or to rebel against it. Miranda escapes punishment from her crimes and sins, presumably because she did not violate any crimes as Isabella.

‘ To the end, the the narrator’s voice works to defuse its own simple moralizing.’ (Pearson.) The narrator dismisses any detail of Miranda’s ending, and instead reports with ‘ they say...’, taking a step back from her narration to only offer a simple moral ending. Overall, Behn, within her novellas, presents patriarchal society as catalyst for a woman committing crime.

She is suggesting that society is to blame party for a woman’s a crime because, due to their harsh treatment and suppression, often, their lack of freedom, will lead them to lash out. Women will turn to crime, driven by the patriarchal society, or to gain the freedom that it refuses them. Within the History of the Nun, Isabella turns to crime to protect her reputation from shame. However, within the Fair Jilt, Miranda takes on a more masculine role in order to resist the harsh entrapment that society places on her. To conclude, Aphra Behn represents female crime as a way to subvert the sexist system and to resist strict gender roles.