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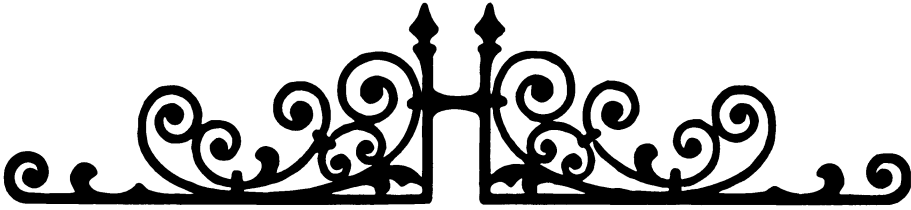
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**Freak Space:
Aphra Behn's Strange Bodies**

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The recurring spectacle of freakish female bodies in Aphra Behn's fiction and plays—"dwarf" and "giant" sisters, sisters mute and deformed, a blind cousin—registers Behn's peculiar anxiety about the negotiation of desire. Most obviously, such unnaturally sized and dysfunctional forms represent the binaries of body and mind, sexual and psychical availability, poverty and wealth that Behn sought (perhaps ambiguously) to critique. The beautiful but speechless Maria, for example, along with her misshapen but witty sister Belvideera in *The Dumb Virgin*, depict a starkly dichotomized view of the cultural positions women could occupy: sexually desirable as bodies, but unmarriageable as minds, either vulnerable to the aggressions of male desire or outspoken and alone. Temporarily blind Celesia from *The Unfortunate Bride* seems to exemplify women's position as objects of a male gaze, never the agents of their own looking or wanting. And the exaggerated sizes of the Jewish sisters from *The Second Part of The Rover* manifest an obvious and ironic point about gender and class transgression. The success of four different Englishmen's schemes to augment their status through the wealth of these "monsters of quality" is bound up with the women's ugliness: money alone cannot propel a poor fool across the threshold into gentlemanliness, nor can it transform a monster into a truly desirable lady.

While there appears to be little dispute about Behn's royalist and Tory allegiances, critics have agreed less often on the precise nature of her stance on the role of women; her texts' notoriously ambivalent rendering of female characters makes any firm assessment of Behn's "feminist" sympathies difficult to achieve. Susan Staves has argued that while Behn was clearly uncomfortable with the prevailing (and conflicting) gender ideologies of her day, the treatment of fe-

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male characters in her texts suggests that she could not fully imagine “alternative, less misogynist constructions of womanhood.” “[T]here is something sad,” Staves writes, about women “‘too feeble’ to resist the importunities of fickle and perfidious rakes” (27). We might thus understand Behn’s deformed and disabled women as a deployment of strange embodiment to articulate all that goes wrong in a society governed by mutually exclusive and compromising narratives of identity. For example, when desire impels some subversion of class status or normative gender roles, or when class mobility threatens a sense of firm social organization, the result may be dramatized through the spectacle of Blunt climbing a ladder to kiss his betrothed Giant, or in the “tragic” muteness of Maria, at once result and cause of women’s damaging impulse toward self-determination. Reading such textual details in this way, anomalous corporeality seems to function doubly as the sign of dominant cultural paradigms under stress as well as a disheartening (and somewhat uninteresting) metaphor for women’s cultural disenfranchisement.

But as I will argue here, it is also the case that Behn’s return to unusually embodied women goes beyond mere shorthand for marginality, disempowerment, helplessness, or lack. Behn’s representation of disability subverts expectations in provocative ways. At the end of *The Dumb Virgin*, it is the “deformed” but verbally dexterous sister who survives. In *The Unfortunate Bride*, blindness is not so much a mark of frailty or loss of power but rather an indictment of the very process by which normal embodiment—and thus gender roles—are assessed. In *The Second Part of The Rover*, the dwarf and giant sisters are no more or less valuable—or objectified—than maidens and courtesans in the play’s examination of female value, and their unusual sizes work to resist the idea that bodies, in a society obsessed with the external trappings of wealth, don’t matter. Such shifting configurations of agency and embodiment question the forms of symbolism that undergird identity politics and that produced, in Behn’s work as well as her world, violent collapse at the center of patriarchal sexual relationships, constructions of the family, and the state. Through her unnaturally “spaced” female bodies—bodies too big or too small, blind and mute bodies that interrogate relationships between gender, sexual agency, authorship, and class—Behn suggests that to carve out spheres of influence unrelegated to domesticity or sexual objectification, women must and do exceed the parameters of physical, and thus also ideological, space.

As a writer of her moment, to be sure, Behn does make use of disability and deformity in a conventionally tropic way, staging bodily irregularity as a spectacle that invites wonder and ridicule, or as a problem that must be rectified if women are to be “restored” (a word that recurs throughout *The Second Part of The Rover*) to proper sexual and marital arrangements. My contention here is

that she also, by focusing within texts on how an impaired or disfigured body is made meaningful, calls attention to the act of interpretation itself, which in turn invites a reconsideration not only of the operations of patriarchal ideology on women's embodied selves, but also of how Behn might have conceptualized embodiment outside of ableist paradigms. It is not simply, as Ros Ballaster once argued, that Behn "presents physical disability in a woman as a means of dramatizing masculine specularly and narcissism" (199), a notion that must first reify disability as the mark of inadequacy and weakness in order for it to make sense as a metaphor for the condition of women. As I hope to show, disability is both symbolic but also material in Behn's work. Behn's freakish bodies operate as sites of discursive conflict, their unnatural or unfamiliar manner of "taking up space" the physical sign of contested ideological boundaries, but not always, or not inevitably, as mere test cases of the tension between stereotypical female compliance and transgression.

Historically, Behn sits at the cusp of two predominant constructions of disability. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Helen Deutsch, Felicity Nussbaum, Lennard Davis, and others have noted, the seventeenth century was a period of transition in how Western cultures understood and defined instances of unusual corporeality. An older model tended to explain anomalous bodies in religious or supernatural terms, most often as signs of God's displeasure with an individual, family, or group, or as outcroppings of nature's abundant overflow. But as the modern subject emerges in the eighteenth century, discourses of divine punishment and wondrous nature are replaced by new scientific and medical paradigms that pathologize disability as bodily error or deviance. Following Foucault, many scholars have linked this shift to the rise of capitalism, with its emphasis on the production of "normal," "average," endlessly repeatable commodities. In Thomson's words, "Whereas in premodern society, individuating markers indicated power and privilege, in modern society, an unmarked norm is the reference point" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 40); coinciding with the development of modernity is the transformation of "prodigious monster" into "pathological terata": "wonder," writes Thomson, "becomes error" (*Freakery* 3). As we will see, Behn inscribes both responses to disability in her texts, creating impaired and unusually formed women whose "strange" characteristics are alternately read as terrifying and wondrous, excessive and insufficient, spectacles to be witnessed and personal failings to be overcome.

Disabled bodies in early modern literature and culture function as a receptacle of sorts, a physical sign of all that can and does go wrong in the moral or social sphere. Richard III is only the quintessential example of how the grotesque figure becomes the repository of all that a society denies and ignores about embodiment—its disturbing propensity for losing control, its

fragile mortality—as well as itself. Elizabeth Grosz writes that “[f]reaks traverse the very boundaries that secure the ‘normal’ subject in its given identity and sexuality” (64), and many scholars have examined more specifically early modern England’s “anxiety, latent or explicit, about any form of behaviour which threatened to transgress the fragile boundaries between man and the animal creation” (Thomas 38).¹ Paul Semonin writes that “so-called monsters ... had thrilled learned Englishmen since the Restoration,” and names physical anomalies and impairments of all sorts—cleft palates, missing or extra fingers and limbs, paralysis, deafness, blindness, hermaphrodites and conjoined twins, dwarfs and giants, multi-breasted women and eunuchs—as examples of the kind of “prodigious” bodies that were regularly displayed in monster shows and monster ballads both to entertain and to warn (69). Whether these “human oddities”² were considered evidence of divine wrath and power, mistakes or wonders of nature, the markings of sinful activity or a blasphemous soul, or a medical error in need of fixing, anomalous corporeality is never “simply itself,” in Thomson’s words (*Freakery* 3, 1), but rather a spectacle—an interpretive ambiguity that, in both signifying and stimulating the onlooker’s anxiety about bodily wholeness or predictability, seems to necessitate resolution.

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that because disability “inaugurates [this] explanatory need,” the representation of aberrant physicality in literature is not incidental to a text’s production of symbolic meaning, but rather “an opportunistic metaphoric device” (47) integral to the process of depicting its particular ideological assumptions: “disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” (59–60, 49). Behn’s unusually embodied women clearly play this kind of symbolic role in the project of investigating the shifting priority of cultural discourses or bodily particulars, external accoutrements and internal essence, in stabilizing personhood. Instances of dysfunction or difference are never simply unremarkable features unrelated to a character’s subjectivity. These bodies are, instead, both relentlessly commented upon in dialogues that encapsulate the texts’ larger preoccupation with gender and class identity, and indications of something gone awry in a society that treats women as a disposable commodity. At the same time, however, Behn disrupts any one-to-one correspondence between body and character; to the degree that the “nature” of disabled or “deformed” women *cannot* be predicted or guaranteed by the capacity or contours of their bodies, Behn’s texts put the lie to the kinds of assumptions that drive essentialist thinking and legitimize patriarchal hierarchies.³

We can observe these intersecting reactions to and uses of disability played out in the stock dichotomies of purity and lust, interior and exterior beauty,

imaginative fancy and physical vision that pervade *The Unfortunate Bride; or, The Blind Lady a Beauty*.⁴ The plot follows a typical course, an ironized *Romeo and Juliet* full of ardent romance, deferred desire, intercepted letters, mistaken betrayal, and death. At the center of the tale are Frankwit, characterized by such "inward Endowments" (402) as humility, pleasant conversation, and a "free, and moving Air"; and Belvira, a beautiful and not unwealthy youth whose eyes both greedily absorb Frankwit's charms and stoke his desire with their "bright Lustre" (404). The consummation of this passion is delayed, however, by Belvira's conviction that "her Desires could live in their own longings" (405), and she turns to her blind (and exorbitantly wealthy) cousin Celesia for corroboration of this philosophy. Love can only endure, Belvira argues, "without the last Enjoyment" (405), and Celesia concurs, first telling Frankwit that "it is but a sickly Soul which cannot nourish its Offspring of Desires without preying upon the Body" (405), and adding that sighted lovers "have am'rous Looks to feed on" (406).

The tension between Belvira and Frankwit turns on an age-old opposition between womanly resistance and manly need, between the rarified intermingling of souls and the evacuating demands of the flesh.⁵ To act on desire is at once to satisfy and destroy it; deferral is a woman's only defense against being "found out" as a "Raree-show" or "slight of Hand" (407). Celesia, however, avoids her cousin's worry that "Marriage Enjoyments does but wake you from your golden Dreams" (406) by being impervious to the dangers of erotic looking. Heiress to "Fifty thousand Pound in Money, and some Estate in Land," Celesia is physically and therefore also symbolically "Blind to all these Riches"—and by implication able to see more "clearly in her Mind" (405) than her sighted friends. Ballaster has argued that in the "specular economy of love" that prevails in *The Unfortunate Bride*, a blind woman is worthless; Celesia's financial value is "zero" because she cannot reflect back with her eyes Frankwit's narcissistic desire (200). But in fact, Celesia's disability makes her quite useful to the romantic plot. In a superficial way, her "value" derives from stereotypical myths about blindness as the mark of "insight." Blindness, precisely because it guards Celesia from the "Tricks" (405) of vision to which ordinary lovers fall prey, is understood to grant her a kind of compensatory moral wisdom that comes from being innocent of worldly obsessions, and she is thus called upon as the natural arbiter of prosaic romantic dispute.⁶

More crucially to the text overall, however, blindness also acts as a point of interference in or resistance to the forward drive toward sexual fulfillment. Where Ballaster contends that Celesia "counts for nothing" in the erotic dynamics of *The Unfortunate Bride* because she is blind (202), we might instead consider Celesia as a critical wedge in the trajectory of consummation, her dis-

ability triangulating heterosexual dynamics. In his pursuit of love, for example, Frankwit must contend with the combined obstacles of the two cousins—the “normal” woman whose procreative eyes contain “smiling Babies” (404) and “Sparkl[e] with radiant Lustre all Divine” (408) but cannot be possessed, and the disabled woman, a “charming” (405) beauty of vast wealth whose insufficient eyes neither command nor receive the missives of love. Money and sexual availability are separated out in the various female characters in a way that draws attention to the provoking question of whether or not a woman’s monetary (and one might add here intellectual) independence would remove her from participation in the game of romance, in what Staves would call one of Behn’s “efforts to disaggregate the value of a woman” (24). Here the narrative situates the cousins as two articulations of female identity defined in some relation to the pursuing man, where neither woman exactly gratifies Frankwit’s desire—or, to put it more strongly, both women in different ways manage to interrupt the momentum of his sexual energy.

More provocatively, Celesia is herself a source of interest, to Frankwit and Belvira alike. Stereotypically, Celesia is a spectacle: Frankwit calls her “Strange” and “charming,” and seems surprised to discover that he finds her blind eyes’ “Glances” (406) stimulating. She is an exotic object of Frankwit’s prurient curiosity; he cannot fully comprehend how her mind might work in the absence of sight (displaying a still-common tendency to globalize disability from one physical impairment to a kind of comprehensive bodily and cognitive breakdown),⁷ though he also claims that her imaginative insight “excels the certainty” of physical vision (406). Celesia is, then, as Thomson has said of the disabled figure, “an interpretive occasion,” both “familiar and alien” (*Freakery* 1), stimulating both curiosity and pity in what Susan Wendell refers to as a “double-edged form of appreciation” (66). The fact that Celesia can’t see them fascinates both Frankwit and Belvira, who cannot imagine that Celesia doesn’t “bewail [her] want of Sight” (405) as a tragic impediment to the charms of erotic looking. “I could almost wish you my own Eyes for a Moment,” says Frankwit to Celesia, “to view your charming Cousin” (405), and Belvira comments in turn: “I fancy she . . . only longs for Sight to look on [Frankwit]” (406). Both assume that Celesia would “naturally” prefer sight to blindness, and both address disability as a problem, unable to consider it from beyond the terms of their own romantic plot. Importantly, however, this conversation portrays both lovers looking not at each other but rather *at Celesia herself*, contradicting Ballaster’s assertion that Celesia’s “attempts to break in on the narcissistic closure of the lovers’ looks are futile” (200). And given the excessiveness not of Celesia’s body but of Frankwit and Belvira’s amatory vocabulary, Celesia ends

up seeming less like an objectified spectacle than an amused observer of the fatuous machinations of Restoration courtship.

To the degree that she privileges “normal” sightedness as an amplifier of the disembodied enjoyment she advocates, which in itself reads as an unremarkable strategy for defending feminine chastity, Celesia does seem to perpetuate a cliché about women’s tenuous hold on honor or reputation. As I have been arguing, however, because she stalls Frankwit in his quest for the sexual object, Celesia interrupts the achievement of sexual fulfillment as defined by both intercourse and male desire. When Celesia remarks that a married Frankwit “would be more out of Sight than he already is” (406), her pun makes explicit the revisionary connection being drawn here between an “unnatural” female body and the power dynamics of able-bodied, heteronormative relations: it would be worse to become embroiled in the hollow and duplicitous farce of marriage than not to be able to “see” Frankwit because she is blind and thus unable to appreciate his “dazling” handsomeness (406). In this sense, Celesia’s disability extracts her, at least temporarily, from the type of hierarchical, complacent exchange of erotic platitudes in which Belvira and Frankwit engage, and positions her as a locus of alternative pleasures. For instance, Celesia’s endorsement of an intriguing and specifically female desire to linger in the joy of unconsummated longing is sustained in the text not just by looking but also by letter-writing, and thus guarantees the forward motion of the female narrator’s story—which we might also understand as the fulfillment of Behn’s own writerly desire.

Both triangulation and homoeroticism recur later in the text, when Frankwit and Belvira, temporarily separated, write fervent letters professing their commitment. Here it is Belvira who violates the exclusivity of this textual love-making by insinuating Celesia into her side of the exchange, first by informing Frankwit that Celesia’s eyesight has been miraculously restored, and next by showing a letter to Celesia, “who look’d upon any Thing that belong’d to *Frankwit*, with rejoycing Glances” (410). It is almost as if Celesia constitutes an exaggerated version of Belvira: claiming in her blindness that “Sight is Fancy” (406), she credits and even embodies Belvira’s notion that imagined sex is best; then, after the “Cloud of Blindness” is “broke,” her eyes copiously “flow,” “shine,” and “flash” (410) as she reads Belvira’s letter to her lover. But while the ostensible object of desire here is Frankwit, Celesia’s now-sighted eyes behold the *woman* rather than the man; it is Belvira herself, as much as her letter, that “belongs” to Frankwit, and which Celesia thus regards with her passionate and “rejoycing Glances.” The restoration of “normal” vision thus does no more to enable heterosexual consummation than blindness does to impede various forms of female pleasure.

Celesia's eyes are therefore "Strange!" (406) in this text in an unexpected way—not because the male lover cannot understand them, but because they delay the forward motion of romantic intrigue, disrupt the erotic technology of looking, and redirect desire away from consummation and toward intimacy with no end-point, thus overturning the predatory and climactic momentum of libertine sexual politics. Moreover, the story becomes fully tragic only when Celesia *regains* sight; normative bodily attributes are associated with disempowerment. At the end of the tale, the machinations of a nefarious widow have stymied the lovers' reunion and instigated a tangle of misapprehensions; Wildvill, to whom Belvira is now engaged, mistakenly kills her, and is in turn stabbed by Frankwit, who will eventually marry Celesia. This union, foretold but not shown, is deferred by the female narrator; Celesia will be folded into conventional marriage, but the story ends with her "bemoan[ing] her unhappiness of sight" (414) for displaying before her the violent consequences of men's jealous possessiveness of women. Looking, as the final scene insists, can produce deathly results: when at last Frankwit has Belvira in his arms, Wildvill misunderstands what he sees, and fatally penetrates his beloved with his sword.

Far from "passive and powerless" (Pearson, "Gender and Narrative" 50), Celesia has subversive effects on this narrative: blind, she incites Belvira's sexual refusal of Frankwit, and sighted, introduces homoerotic gazing. It is difficult to agree with Ballaster's assessment that "without sight and without writing, Celesia lacks the precondition and the capacity to signify meaningfully in the social order" (202). It might seem that Celesia's miraculous recovery reinforces an ableist assumption that disability is a tragic fate, or that a physically impaired woman would be, though perhaps sexually intriguing, unmarriageable. But while *The Unfortunate Bride* is a text of its time, employing (and then "rescuing") a disabled character for her symbolic potential rather than figuring blindness on its own terms, Celesia is nonetheless a fully realized subject, one whose disability works in unconventional ways to critique women's struggle, often to the death, for active determination of the circulation of desire.

The Dumb Virgin; or, The Force of Imagination similarly deploys irregular female bodies to shape a critique of male empowerment and the tight confines in which women travel. In this text, concerned with the ways in which women's creative and discursive potential is both accounted for and stalled in patriarchal society, disabled corporeality serves two critical purposes. While the narrator reports that certain "learn'd" individuals locate the cause of two daughters' physical anomalies in their mother's unruly mind, the text overall counters that evaluation, suggesting instead that what is more properly at issue is a culture that suppresses women's imaginative force and justifies that coercion by at-

tributing to female imagination an excessive and insidious power. Through the physically deformed Belvideera and her mute sister Maria, this text literalizes a conventional splitting of wit and beauty. Each sister embodies, in a somewhat simplistic fashion, the fate of women, as the spectacle of Belvideera's ugliness is somehow bound up with her intelligence and verbal dexterity, and Maria's beauty seems both cause and effect of her silence. But while this apparent correspondence between defect and disposition ironizes social proscriptions of female speech, authorship, or independence, disability and deformity in *The Dumb Virgin* also challenge the mechanism whereby ideological meaning is attached to the body.

The narrative begins by explicitly ascribing deformity and dysfunction to the unchecked imagination of a mother whose "Frights and dismal Apprehensions" produce the freakish Belvideera: "a Daughter, its Limbs . . . distorted, its Back bent, and tho' the face was the freest from Deformity, yet had it no Beauty to Recompence the Dis-symetry of the other Parts." Next comes Maria, "the most beautiful Daughter . . . that ever adorn'd *Venice* but naturally and unfortunately Dumb, which defect the learn'd attributed to the Silence and Melancholy of the Mother, as the Deformity of the other was to the extravagance of her Frights" (424). These "monstrous" births suggest the ongoing currency of superstitious attitudes about women's bodies and the mysterious relationship between their cognitive and reproductive functions: a woman's imagination could impress all manner of strange delineations upon a developing fetus, and the resulting corporeal failures of her offspring would cast obvious blame on the ungoverned operations of the mother's mind.⁸ Before she is named in the text, Belvideera is an "it," the strange contours of her body denying her both gender and personhood. Given the compensatory logic that seeks some sort of reparation for the tragedy of disability, disfigurement as dramatic as Belvideera's would need to be redressed in some way, but the narrator states explicitly that Belvideera's face had "no Beauty to Recompence the Dis-symetry of the other Parts" (424). Deformity is characterized as a discomfiting lack of proportion—a dissymmetry, things out of balance. All this, then—a disorderly body (world?), out of sync and unwhole—can be produced by a woman's disruptive mind. It is perhaps better to be beautiful and silent, the text implies through its more extensive description of Belvideera, than vocal and deformed.

Ultimately, however, the tale not only reverses this hierarchy but also dissolves the dividing up of parts and attributes in any given female character. Rather than conclude that the sisters' impairments serve to condemn their mother's active imagination (or their lenient father for his failure to "command" it [421]), we might notice the way the text works to reveal how blaming

the mother disguises other more urgent social realities: a woman's vulnerability to male aggression, for instance, as the extravagant "Frights" that cause Belvideera's extravagant shape occur when the mother is "taken by ... Pyrates" (424). Maria's muteness, similarly, mimics the fact that her mother ended up "rarely speaking," a voicelessness that is contextualized as a sign of women's complicated social status rather than this particular mother's stubborn or selfish melancholy. As in *The Unfortunate Bride*, then, Behn employs the stereotypes in so stark a way in part to challenge them. Here, the causal relation between a mother's fancy and her daughters' corporeality seems less actual than ironically exaggerated; reference to the unnamed (but implicitly gendered) "learn'd" suggests hierarchies of knowledge and evaluative powers that the text will go on to subvert.

It is also typical to read Belvideera and Maria as embodiments of a social system that produced what Jacqueline Pearson calls "painful self-divisions" in its women ("Gender and Narrative" 48). In their radical difference from each other, Belvideera and Maria seem clearly to manifest a prevalent binary in Behn's work (and, of course, in Restoration literature generally) of beauty and wit, where the exercise of a woman's intellect is seen as disconnected from, and even antithetical to, her sexual appeal. Maria is unsurpassingly beautiful yet "dumb," while ugly Belvideera commands "a piercing Wit, ... depth of Understanding," and "grace of Speech" (425). Like the cousins Belvira and Ceesia, these sisters together comprise a kind of hybrid whole—the one's body subordinated to her mind, the other's discourse sacrificed to her beauty. But neither Belvideera nor Maria is so unidimensional as their respective disabilities might initially imply. While Dangerfield, for example, the rakish soldier, desires them precisely for what he perceives to be their categorical difference—"his Love ... divided between the Beauty of one Lady, and Wit of another" (431)—the sisters themselves blur that strict divide: graceful Belvideera, for instance, has a "charm[ing]" (425) effect on others, while Maria is not only a "great Proficient in Painting" but also capable of "Discourse by the Fingers," an invented sign language that contravenes the kinds of assumptions captured in the term "dumb."⁹

While the narrative may initially seem, then, to capitulate to the easy "attribution" of physical defect to the mismanagement of a woman's mind, or to a conventional separation between mental acuity and physical desirability in a woman, the action overall endorses female imagination rather than condemning it as capable of producing monstrosity—to the contrary, both disabled women in this text produce art and language. Belvideera is "indefatigably addicted to Study," understands "all the *European Languages*," and speaks so eloquently that she "charm[s] all her Hearers" (424-25). And when "the most

Famous Painter in *Italy*" is so enchanted by the "Vivacity of her Look" that he cannot complete a portrait of Maria, that sister grows impatient with his metaphorical impotence and "finishe[s] it herself" (425). In the first instance, Belvideera commands her audience through her graceful and intelligent speech; in the second, the arresting effect of Maria's beauty shuts down only the man's creative momentum, not her own. Unlike Belvideera's uncompensated deformity, the "Loss of [Maria's] Tongue" is said to be "paid" for by "the Language of her Eyes"—but here, eyes instigate not romantic looking but male helplessness that must be salvaged by the disabled woman's own artistic skill. It is hardly the case that because she cannot speak Maria "can have no autonomous desire," as Ballaster claims, or that she has "no control" over the messages of her body (196). Not only is Maria "an active subject" in this scene, to quote Pearson, "authoring herself as the male painter fails to do" ("Gender and Narrative" 48), but she also conducts her own style of signed communication with her sister.

When Belvideera survives the bloody tableau which culminates the revelation of incest and the brutal deaths of her sister, father, and would-be lover, *The Dumb Virgin* seems to hold up the deformed body as the symbol of a culture run amok—one in which female desire is read as unlawful and internally disruptive. Belvideera endures, one might say, because deformity is the result of incest, as Maria succumbs to the force of her romantic imagination and fails to protect her "Fort" (441) from Dangerfield's advances (Dangerfield being revealed in the end as the sisters' long-lost brother). Where her imaginative and autonomy-seeking mother once exploded the proper boundaries of the family, Maria now implodes them by catalyzing her own and her brother's desire. But while it is true that Maria's muteness seems to make her vulnerable to Dangerfield's sexual aggression, since "he knew ... she cou'd not tell" (440), when a swordfight claims both Dangerfield and the sisters' father, it is less sexual vulnerability than "Anguish" (442) at men's violent jealousy of each other for which Maria most bemoans her lack of speech. Women can "say nothing" when it comes to men's deadly opportunism, their trampling over women as they jockey for social position, or their fatal misinterpretations of each other's actions.

And when, in her final moments, Maria regains her voice (much like Celesia's eyes newly sighted) it is to cry out "Incest, Incest" (444), a specific condemnation of the boundaries of the patriarchal family being drawn not too loosely but rather too tightly—so tightly, indeed, as to pinion a woman in the impossible but not altogether unlikely position of serving a man (a "dangerous" man) as both lover and sister. It seems important, in this regard, that the sister whose impairment is repeatedly characterized as "natural"—Maria is "naturally Dumb" yet "imperfect" (436), "naturally and unfortunately Dumb"

(424)—is the one destroyed by the violence of unlawful sex that confuses the category distinctions that undergird proper social relationships. Disability, in Behn's era, was both natural and unnatural, a wondrous manifestation of nature's abundance and a frightening instance of absence and insufficiency, an externally imposed mark and a personal affliction. The narrator says outright that the girls' father sought to "suppl[y] the Defaults of Nature by the Industry of Art" and thus educated them, and that the greatest "Prodigy" was not their irregular bodies but rather the "Progress" of their learning (424). Maria's natural muteness, then, reputedly caused by an unnaturally imaginative mother and overcome by the force of an unnatural sexual affair, calls radically into question designations of wrong or right that constrain female autonomy and desire.

Disfigured Belvideera, in turn, may be the only possible survivor of a world in which women get caught in the crossfire of political intrigue and violence. Her "bent," broken body—with its "Defects" (424) and "Defaults" (426), asymmetrical and "distorted" (424)—seems an obvious symbol of social collapse, ethical breakdown, familial failure; but at the same time, witty, durable Belvideera also represents an alternative code of values for women, one that privileges intelligence and minimizes the significance to a woman's identity of male affection. Though Belvideera is said to reserve enough money from her father's estate "to maintain her a Recluse all the rest of her Life" (444), we may hear in that isolation a pointedly hopeful remark about solitary women determining their own material and intellectual lives. The disastrous consequences of *The Dumb Virgin* has less to do with neglectful fathers and fanciful daughters than with the repressive energies of patriarchal sex and marriage. Importantly, what definitively ruptures the two sisters from one another—beauty from wit, body from mind—is Dangerfield, with his inability to suppress the "Pitch of Passion" (440). In this sense, "ugly" Belvideera's reclusiveness does more than simply uphold the marriage market as *the* arena in which women garner a sense of subjectivity. More subtly and subversively, it recalls a time before the entrance of male sexuality, when the "ingenious Sisters" (425) invented and perfected a sign language that united body and mind and joined the women together in "silent" yet "significant" conversation (425).

I have been arguing that Behn's impaired or irregular female bodies do not suffer the kind of representational fate that we might expect, given conventional literary uses of disability or social and medical attitudes that construed disability as both an act of cosmic retribution and an individual error to be transcended or denied. Belvideera is portrayed less as the deformed wreckage of her world's calamitous collapse than an unexpectedly delineated alternative to that world's ideological perversity; in blindness Celesia is not disempowered but rather subversive, and her regained sight condemns "normality" as tragic.

In *The Second Part of The Rover*, the Jewish dwarf and giant would seem to be cartoonish components of Behn's critique of what Susan J. Owen calls "unregenerate cavalier predatoriness" (21), their repellant physical (and, of course, religious) forms made tolerable in direct proportion to their wealth. Critics seem to agree that the sisters' atypical sizes stand for the excessive or "unnatural" social importance attached to money, or, to put it slightly differently, the monetary value accorded women. Despite the fact that "men find both women's bodies disgusting," to quote Staves (24), no fewer than four characters court the sisters for their respective £100,000; and as Owen puts it, "The function of 'these Lady Monsters' (VI: 1.1.223-4) is to show the monstrousness of libertinism itself: its object is so irrelevant that it can even be a freak (in Restoration terms), so long as there is the spice of novelty" (74). Convincing in terms of the play's interrogation of the entanglements of body and wealth, however, such readings nonetheless depend on the epistemological stability of "monster," an identity category we might also understand the play to resist.

The men in the play respond to the sisters as if they were a traveling freak show. Word of their sizes circulates among the English cavaliers as "the strangest news,"¹⁰ and Willmore asks how much it would cost him to take a peek at these "mistakes in Nature" (1.1.196-97) (recalling the common seventeenth-century explanation of unusual physicality as *lusus naturae* or one of nature's jokes). The women are variously insulted as a "She *Gargantua*" more shocking than a "*Centaure*" (3.1.26) and a "little diminutive Mistriss, my small Epitome of Woman-kind" (3.1.53-54), as a "thing of Horror" (3.1.323) and an "ill-favour'd Baboon" (5.4.528). Most often, however, they are monsters—"Monsters arriv'd from *Mexico*" (1.1.169-70), "Monsters of Quality" (188), "these two Monsters" (216), "Lady Monsters" (223-24), "our Monsters" (2.1.268)—in an insistent refrain that poses the question of where monstrosity really lies in this culture, and who gets to name it. Too little or too huge, the sisters are made sport of, spectacles whose unwitting participation in a complicated ruse depends upon their own desire to be "restor'd to moderate sizes" (1.1.201). It is clear that to be immoderate, out of "exact Proportion" (198), is ultimately to be deemed "not capable of Marriage" (185), but also that the lure of money will catapult a man over the apparently insurmountable obstacle of physical undesirability. What makes the sisters unattractive as sexual partners, then—their disproportionate sizes—is precisely what makes them appealing as wives: that is, the disproportionate size of their wealth. More to the point, however, is that the real object of the mountebank and marriage scam in this play is other men, rather than women; as Fetherfool says to Blunt, "how we'l domineer, *Ned*, hah—over *Willmore* and the rest" (1.1.222-23), not knowing that he himself will ultimately be the butt of Willmore's joke. What gets trotted out as freakish here is not so

much the barely human sisters but the obsessiveness around money, jewels, and sex that most of the other characters display throughout the play.

The Second Part of The Rover pursues Behn's preoccupation with the conundrum of essence or nature by putting extraordinary pressure on the outward form of her characters. Willmore announces that "all the finery cannot hide the Whore!" (1.2.463), but he also articulates a slippage between accoutrement and body, and in turn bodily appearance and worth or meaning; in a quarrel with La Nuche, he says of the Giant and the Dwarf: "these things of horror have beauties too, . . . beauties that will not fade; Diamonds to supply the lustre of their eyes, and Gold the brightness of their hair, a well got Million to atone for shape, and Orient Pearls, more white, more plump and smooth, than that fair body men so languish for" (3.1.324-28). Similarly, Fetherfool whippers exultantly to the Harliquin as they sneak up on the sleeping Giant, "how rich she is in Jems: How amiable looks that Neck with that delicious row of Pearls about it" (5.4.315-16). Beauty becomes synonymous with jewelry; the odd contours of the women's actual bodies disappear behind the enticement of their wealth. Derek Hughes makes the point quite strongly, citing the play's "erasure of bodily character and uniqueness" and stating that "jewels take the place of personal identity and essence" (131, 129). Unexpectedly, then, it would seem that bodies don't matter in this story, whether fair or deformed. All that signifies are exterior trappings—yet these, too, as Hughes argues, have no certain or guaranteed status; meaning is arbitrarily assigned. "[I]nstead of being represented through signs," Hughes writes, "[the body] is associatively identified with non-signifying objects, to the point of being completely secondary to them. The objects do not signify the body; they take its place" (128-29).

In this case, the extraordinary bodies of the Jewish sisters would not represent femininity as a societal spectacle infiltrating from the periphery, but rather sheer emptiness, the very labels assigned the women, "Giant" and "Dwarf," signifying nothing. What would be the "nature," then, of the "unnaturally" sized sisters? Do their grotesque sizes serve merely to demonstrate the extent to which men will carry their obsessive fascination with valuable objects, or that, as Wataru Fukushi suggests, they must be understood as "the very representation of the Other" (11) in order to prove the point about men's acquisitive or rapacious energies? The paradox in such interpretations is the way in which they make anomalous corporeality matter precisely as it is reckoned to be inconsequential in the face of the gems it supports; for the Giant and the Dwarf to accomplish the symbolic task of dramatizing greed, their particular bodies (and their bodily difference from both courtesan and lady) must be meaningfully different—indeed, repugnant—rather than meaningless.

But there is another way to understand the play that attends more carefully to the specificity of various bodies, especially those of its “other” women. Heidi Hutner’s persuasive reading argues that *The Second Part of The Rover* constructs a “utopian vision” of female autonomy in which “the female body/land can never be appropriated” (117). Through the figures of the prostitute La Nuche and the two sisters, Hutner asserts, Behn “promotes the expression of female desire” and “overturns the masculinist ideology that attempts to erase difference. . . . *The Rover’s* Jewish female monsters are powerful women whose bodies cannot be dominated and controlled” (112-13). According to Hutner, it is crucial that the sisters’ “deformed” bodies are never reformed or transformed in the play, which she views as evidence of Behn’s critique of a sexually repressive “puritanical” ideology. Not simply types of alarming difference subdued by the triumphant Tories Shift and Hunt, as Fukushi suggests, the sisters have fully realized interiors, and are differentiated from each other and other women not simply by form but by thought and desire, which they openly articulate (Fukushi 11). Where Blunt fears that propagation with the Dwarf will “dwindle” his family “into Pigmies or Fayries” (3.1.115), for instance, the Giant offers a more confident declaration from the woman’s point of view: “I’ll marry none whose Person and Courage shall not bear some proportion to mine. . . . not that I would change this Noble frame of mine, cou’d I but meet my Match, and keep up the first Race of Man intire: but since this scanty World affords none such, I to be happy, must be new Created” (3.1.70-71, 82-85).

This is, perhaps, the pithiest remark of the play, in that it calls for equivalence between men and women without either collapsing or exoticizing difference. The Giant asks only for her “match,” a partner not to mirror her narcissistically but simply to “bear some proportion” to her own “Noble” characteristics, and though she agrees to recreate herself to abide by the “proportions” of her social milieu, the play denies her that transformation in a way that suggests a resolute materiality to bodies, an ongoingness that disability studies has taught us to be sensitive to—what Tobin Siebers has referred to as “the hard simple reality of the body” (749). Bodies matter, not simply to circulation in the marriage market or class strata but to personality and temperament, as the Giant’s assessment of herself makes clear. But at the same time, the play crucially contests the notion of a strict mirroring relationship between outward characteristic and internal nature, indicated by its verbal play on forms of “form.” These “deform’d” sisters will not be “reformed” by an externally imposed, magical, corporeal transformation; if change occurs, it can only be in the ways their bodies are interpreted, and in the possibility that they might eventually find their matches in a world that might view a self-determining woman as neither

whorish nor monstrously perverse but rather unremarkably “typical” of the society in which she lives.

We cannot read Aphra Behn without remembering that she wrote during a time when, to borrow from Elin Diamond, “female authorship was a monstrous violation of the ‘woman’s sphere’” (33). The question raised by all this anomalous corporeality is, then, how far the threshold of female identity—so thoroughly bound up with conceptions of the body—can be extended and redrawn and still be recognizable as, viable as, “womanly.” Perhaps this is why so many of Behn’s extraordinarily embodied women are related, as if to emphasize through the identifications of kinship the ways in which a woman might experience some parts of herself as unnaturally isolated from the whole, and either idealized or vilified by patriarchal culture. To the degree that the pairs of sisters and cousins in each text mimic or complement each other, the difference of disability serves as an index of how a woman is severed from herself by gender inequities. Disabled characters give the lie to the normative subject position to which women could be violently held, thus asking readers to wonder what else might be possible when it comes to women’s narrative, physical, and sexual expression. It is important, in this sense, that Behn’s critique of the status of women so often has its locus in unusual bodies: because bodies really do matter to a woman’s range of social and creative motion, and because gender and sexual double standards are, in the truest sense of the word, fundamentally strange.

NOTES

¹For further discussion of early modern interest in “monstrous births,” see Schwartz and Finucci (6); Winzer; Nelson and Berens; Breitenberg; and Fletcher, who cites a “fascination with hermaphrodites” (40).

²The phrase is Bogdan’s, used throughout *Freak Show*.

³See Ahern for a different take on the body/character relationship that suggests Behn’s distrust of a social ethos in which “transparency of being” might be “fake[d]” through inauthentic bodily signs (37).

⁴Page references are to the Summers edition of Behn’s work. On the question of the authorship of the late short fiction typically ascribed to Behn, including *The Unfortunate Bride* and *The Dumb Virgin*, see Janet Todd’s introduction to volume 3 of *The Works of Aphra Behn*, where she writes that since many of these works were published posthumously, “it is impossible to say how many of [them] were written in their entirety by Behn.” Todd suggests that Behn might have left “outlines of tales she intended to elaborate later,” and that the editor and “great ventriloquist Charles Gildon,” who was “good at writing in other people’s styles,” might have thus filled in the

blanks (x). Jane Spencer argues similarly for the possibility that the stories published almost a decade after Behn's death "were not hers at all," proposing that either Gildon or fellow author and mentor Thomas Brown might have been "passing off their own writing as Behn's" (127).

⁵But see Pearson, who argues the opposite, that Behn inverts the stereotype of female denial: "Belvira is putting forward a traditionally masculine view, Frankwit a traditionally feminine one" (199).

⁶On the myth that blind people have either compensatory intuition or heightened sensory abilities, see Kleege (28) and Davis (22).

⁷As Wendell writes, "Disability tends to be associated with tragic loss, weakness, passivity, dependency, helplessness, shame, and global incompetence" (63).

⁸See Park and Daston. On the connection between so-called monstrous births and religious nonconformity, see also Crawford; Knoppers and Landes; and Romack.

⁹See Nelson's article on the rhetorician John Bulwer, whose language theory was clearly influenced by observing deaf people signing ("Bulwer's Speaking Hands"). See also Nelson's article with Bradley S. Berens, "Spoken Daggers, Deaf Ears, and Silent Mouths."

¹⁰References to the play are to the Todd edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line numbers.

¹²Fukushi, 11.

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