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APHRA BEHN'S BLACK BODY: SEX, LIES & NARRATIVITY IN *OROONOKO*

Abstract

This paper traces the peculiar relationship between Aphra Behn, a 17th century novelist, poet, playwright and translator (by all accounts the first professional writer in English, let alone the first *woman* to make her living by her pen) and the hero of her novel *Oroonoko* (an African prince enslaved in Surinam). Although Behn ennobles the young man in the tradition of Rousseau's "noble savage," educating him above his owners and marrying him to a similarly "pure" African maiden, certain discrepancies stand out, among them the facial features of the two slaves (clearly European), the couple's prim and almost-Victorian sensibility, and the Christian brutality of the white slavelords, intent upon destroying Oroonoko for a sacrifice beyond their comprehension.

Previous research addresses *Oroonoko*'s value as an abolitionist work, remarking upon the romance between "lesser" equals as among Europeans, or makes political comparisons between the visage of the noble prince and the English monarchs. Neglected in the literary appreciations is Behn's evident passion for her subject, in its colonial context of illicit interracial love and possession. Is *Oroonoko* a courageous celebration of racial difference itself, in the only conceivable means of presentation available to a 17th century woman? Does *Oroonoko* stand in as a metaphor for an encounter of yet another kind, the trespass of race, class and gender? Couched in the poetic similes of Restoration art and artifice, *Oroonoko* is a story of strangled violence. It is the tale of a woman writer translating desire and meaning into flesh – black flesh, publicly consumed. Behn's authorial "I" is transgressive, transformative. Artfully concealed between covers, Behn projects her bound English body into forbidden territories: foreign darkness, black otherness, and desires too dangerous for words.

Key words

Aphra Behn; Oroonoko; Restoration novels; critical race theory

Lady Sneerwell. Sir Peter, you are not going to leave me?

Sir Peter. Your ladyship must excuse me, I'm called away by particular business. But I leave my character behind me.

(Richard Sheridan, *School for Scandal*)

Where is she, where is woman in all the spaces he surveys, in all the scenes he stages within the literary enclosure? [...] She is in the shadow.

(Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, *The Newly Born Woman*)

Prologue

In the “autobiographical novel” *Oroonoko, or, The Royal Slave*, written by dramatist Aphra Behn, the implications of race and writing are perceptible, even to latter-day readers unfamiliar with 17th century conditions. The ramifications of *writing race* – writing race into being by virtue of creating a fiction, while also writing *about* race by historicising one’s own life – are apparent in both the writing and the life, or lives, of the novelist, as is the danger to the writer of engaging with an evaluation of colour and humanness, particularly in a period of slave-trade. In the work’s opening Behn declares the verity of her narration:

I do not pretend, in giving you the history of this Royal Slave, to entertain my Reader with the adventures of a feign’d hero, whose life and fortunes fancy may manage at the poet’s pleasure; nor, in relating the truth, design to adorn it with any accidents, but such as arrived in earnest to him: and it shall come simply into the world, recommended by its own proper merits, and natural intrigues; there being enough of reality to support it, and to render it diverting, without the addition of invention [...] (1953: 1)

The text also reveals a problem:

I was myself an eye-witness to a great part of what you will find here set down; and what I cou’d not be witness of, I receiv’d from the mouth of the chief actor in this history, the hero himself [...] (1)

Oroonoko was a prince, and yet a slave. In this story Oroonoko, a strong, hulking gem of masculinity, could be minimised, even primitivised, as the Other – and, as I will argue, gendered a woman. Surely Behn, who by virtue of her narrative (let alone the emotions that drive that narrative) had attached herself to a black male, was similarly tokened. This is not to suggest a parallel between the subjugation of women and the enslavement of Africans. In this article I interrogate Behn’s relationship to the eponymous character of Oroonoko as a phenomenon of life-writing, explain how Behn identified herself with the black body of this singular male character, and show the creative import of her identification in this auto-biographical novel.

Indian Queen

I look first at the text of Behn's world. A frontispiece and surviving portrait for John Dryden's *The Indian Queen*, presented by the King's Theatre in 1664, shows a man dressed in strange garb, standing apart. He has one leg pointed out *en attitude*. His entire dress is made of feathers, though the picture is so far removed from the original that it would be difficult to determine their colour or genus. There is no background to identify him, no word. The exoticism of the outfit calls to mind Marquesan islanders and West African villagers. It represents neither. It might even be an advertisement for travel to a tropical island, or for some rare fruit, rather than what it is – a sketch of a theatrical moment. The picture presents us with an illusion: the dress and ornamentation of a person of wealth and stature in the West Indies, with the body and face of a white male actor from the 17th century London stage. People of this time do not dress or look that way; the actor could hardly be further from nobility, the dress further from English fashion.

It is an abomination – part man, part bird, a new kind of monster – but worse: an actor. A person in costume, but not even that: a character. Life in the theatre had been denounced by William Prynne as an immoral pursuit, one shunned by “persons of quality” – who nonetheless *went* to the theatre. Women in theatre audiences, regardless of their status, wore masks to protect their virtue – as if the eyes, brow, and nose, were features of the face which when hidden cease to exist.¹ At least Prynne was clear. There is no such thing as a good woman in the theatre.

In these days the assumptions made about acting are the same as those made about women: actors, too, are weak creatures. Given to wild emotion, laughter, hysteria, to melancholy and lascivious actions. To act is to assume the lowliest position conceivable in 17th century society: to whore. Living always at the edge, courting conflict. Haunting alleys, tenements, and curtained hallways. A margin, the mirror held up to life, space for the traffic of the stage. Theatre is these things – and less, a span of lines from which to hang. Theatre exists between memory and act, in the instant of the body's defying logic, in order to do and do again. Thus theatre has a sense of the inevitability, producing action that must not be prevented. Theatre is contradiction and prediction in a single gesture, a gift of timing, or a bad joke – repeatable, violable and dangerous. Women for their own good must be protected from such things, leaving men for *their* own good free to enjoy such things as the theatre, and its women – without the trouble of wearing a disguise.

Upon her return from Surinam in (then) British West Indies,² Aphra Behn presented this same feathered dress to the theatre. It was not a theatrical costume but a royal one,³ as she writes in *Oroonoko*:

[...] we trade for feathers, which they order into all shapes, make themselves little short habits of 'em, and glorious wreaths for their heads, necks, arms and legs, whose tinctures are unconceivable. I had a set of these presented to me, and I gave 'em to the King's Theatre; it was the dress of the Indian Queen, infinitely admir'd by persons of quality; and was unimitable. (1953: 2)

Behn says she received it as a gift, but does not indicate why she surrendered so valuable an item to the theatre; for despite the theatre's *a la mode* support by the royal court,⁴ Behn could hardly afford to *give* away something of great value when she was in debt and literally writing for her life. Did she hope to curry favour with Dryden, the playwright whose work it ornamented? This is only one of the mysteries in Behn's life and work which encourage scholars to wonder who she was. Writers from Virginia Woolf to Elin Diamond have insisted that Behn was visionary, a feminist writer far ahead of her time (and, at times, ours). In a preface to Behn's plays, Janet Todd sharply analyses this trend:

As women writers changed from being women authors into producers of discursive strategies, and as writing turned from being self-expression into performative act, it was clear that Behn was poised to make it into feminist fashion, to become the star (in the rarefied firmament of early modern women's scholarship) of the 1980s, as Wollstonecraft of the 1970s [...] Aphra Behn was the everywoman of our time: "Her biography is ours," wrote [Angelina] Goreau. (Behn 1992: 4–5)

But Behn could also be called a canny businesswoman who understood the place assigned to women by her time, and ably exploited herself and other women accordingly. She drew the female character with a wit and individuality rarely seen in the theatre in any era, yet consistently surpassed her peers (most of them male) in presenting the female body for male predation and dramatic vivisection, offering up woman after woman on the wooden plate.

Behn certainly exceeded the pattern for middle-class 17th century women, who typically lived from the allowances of fathers, husbands or solicitors, or a combination of the three. She began writing in earnest at thirty years of age, and died at forty-nine. In that time she wrote in a variety of genres – plays, poetry and a few novels – and is believed to be the first person to have made a living solely from published writings (Ezell 1993: 89; MacCarthy 1946: 25), producing "more plays than any of the British playwrights of her generation except Dryden" (Duffy 1977: xii).⁵ Her life, particularly her early life, is mysterious, poorly documented and contradictorily reported, including by Behn herself. Scholars contest the autobiographical details found between lines in her novels and in forewords to her plays. Part of the difficulty scholars have in tracing Behn's past is that those who preceded us either failed to adequately note their sources or liberally interpreted the material at hand. Behn was probably a spy – in this solitary context, perhaps, a "royal slave" – but outlived her usefulness to the Crown: at Thomas Killigrew's recommendation she was employed for this suspicious purpose, and reported from Antwerp, but her diligent briefs were never believed. Earlier, Behn spent a while in Surinam, where her father received the government post of Lieutenant General; although he died on the ocean en route, she continued the voyage with her family and may have stayed at a plantation owned by a "Ripley." Maureen Duffy records Behn's duration in Surinam as "a few months waiting for a ship

home" (1977: xiii). "Biographies" never yield more than a page or so of information from registries, with the rest conjecture. One biographical note suggests she was involved in a "slave rebellion" (MacCarthy 1946: 26); no original citation appears. There *were* isolated uprisings on the island in 1653 and 1667, but Behn was there in 1663, and perhaps early in 1664 (the colony was founded in 1662).⁶ Upon her Spring return from Antwerp to London she was imprisoned for debt, and in dire need petitioned to Killigrew, but without success. Having no one to support her and no "virtuous" means of keeping herself, Behn turned to writing.

At this time Behn made the present of the feathered dress to the King's Theatre. It is doubly curious that she chose that theatre, for it was at the home of the *other* theatre company⁷ that she was to debut as playwright, opening *The Forc'd Marriage, or The Jealous Bridegroom* at the Duke's Company in Lincoln's Inn Fields, managed by Sir William Davenant until his death in 1668. Perhaps this was her final attempt to win Killigrew's attention. In her premier work Thomas Betterton played lead; playwright Thomas Otway had his one experience onstage as the king – and thereafter gladly returned to writing, as he admits. In an era when women were known by one man or many, Behn thrust herself into public ken by her writing, first performing like men and then out-performing them. This was likely an economic necessity: among her contemporaries perhaps only Otway needed the money that came from professional writing, and he died in the squalor of London's slums. Behn was frequently denounced for promiscuity, an epithet attending all women (and some men) who entered the theatre. It does not pertain to what was politely called a "public life" – that is, a life in the public eye.⁸ Behn's professional output was prolific, political and frequently plagiarised,⁹ yet, for three centuries Behn was perhaps best known (Mahl and Koon 1977: 167) from this coded sally from Alexander Pope's "Epistle to Augustus":

The stage how loosely does Astraea tread,
Who fairly puts all characters to bed. (Book II, epistle i, ll. 290–291)

Whether or not one believes (as I do) that Behn's talent far-outstrips his, it is clear that Pope misconstrues Behn, locating Astraea's "loose" presence onstage and equating her characters' actions with her person. I mean to examine this discrepancy between the ontological female body in the theatre and the (absent) woman writer.

Taking Behn's Word

Written shortly before her death in 1689, *The Royal Slave* is chief among Behn's novels. Thomas Southerne's play of the same title is an undisguised copy of its original, maintaining the story's structure, adventure, even its relationships, but lacking Behn's poetic language and honesty. Most historians assume that the tale comments upon Behn's stay in Surinam. In an extraordinary letter William Byam,

then the colony's deputy governor, reported an attack on "our Lord Proprietor" by a John Allin, which may well have inspired the violence of the novel (Cameron 1961; Todd 1993). But despite its professed autobiographical "truths," like most life-writing Behn's story is a conflicted report; more than a few crucial problems arise in her story of an African prince enslaved in a new colony in the Caribbean – foremost among these Behn herself. My overriding concern is with Behn's notion of her own (writer's) body with respect to the other (fictitious) bodies of her narrative, and what I see as her creation of another or third body of narrative, in which she becomes the heroic black body of her own story. But even this black creation is complicated by another black body, and a lack of courage (or imagination) at a critical nexus in the work.

What Mikhail Bakhtin writes about speaking is supremely applicable to writing a work of fiction, where all character, and therefore all language, issues from one source:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. (1981: 293–294)

In the reader's inner ear a narrator's voice becomes the only audible sound. This is doubly true in Behn's *Oroonoko* with its constellation of narrator and hero, doubling or shadowing the operative process. The unnamed narrator has sole jurisdiction over the twice-named prince in the tale's context. Granting the story its alleged truth, the self-appointed "I" witness interprets events for the reader, her vision a landscape of fancy, her fantasies a reader's architecture.

As a locus for female imagination and desire, a page is unlike any other geography, free of the physical constraints and bounds of the body. It is a place to mark without (immediate) fear of exposure, a growing tree for the carving of initials, or a skin for the wildness of imagination and longing. Desire parades the margins, innocently sheltered in the flourish of a *nom de plume*; most things are equally effable. In the space of a page, the narrator's gender may be forgotten, subsumed, denied; the diligent reader becomes acclimated to a writer's language. This language is itself a body, and as readers we fit ourselves to it, snuggling down between sheets in surrender. Before we caress the page the writer has already left her mark, embedded her will in the blackness of print. Writers discover this freedom. Perhaps this is why novels were for so long considered women's domain, as are romance novels today: novels secure emancipation from the inevitable decay of one's own desire. As Patricia Yaeger writes: "In our preoccupation with the male writer's phallic power of 'breaching' we tend to ignore the woman

writer's double orality – her capacity for transforming boundaries, for defining her own loci of power” (1988: 5).

Behn's predilection for taking what she calls in *The Luckey Chance* “my Masculine Part” has been well explored (Todd 1993; Duffy 1977). The quill pens of male writers are certainly phallic subjects; a female's feathers are expected to be ruffled. In a time when the female writer's body is most closely confused with the body of her writing (Gilbert and Gubar 2000), Behn's “masculine strokes” indicate her desire for freedom from gender rather than a physical reconstruction. It is not primarily Behn's assumption of a masculine part that interests me here, but her sublimation of race. Just as in Behn's hands the feather cloak becomes a theatrical disguise, in her writing the troubled history of Surinam becomes a mask for authorial difference.

Language, Benveniste says, is “organised in such a way that it allows each speaker to appropriate the entire language by designating himself as the ‘I’” (1971: 226). In *Oroonoko* Behn designates the narrator as “I” and conducts the journey of the book through the account of this single, otherwise unidentified voice. There is just enough verifiable information in the novel to designate this “I” as Behn herself. Behn's “I” is not limited to what she can see but rather to what she wants readers to see and believe: the “I” of Behn is clearly visionary, and darkly political.

In the text Prince Oroonoko calls Behn his “Great Mistress,” confessing that her “Word goes a long way with me.” He who belongs to no man confirms himself under the power of a woman only then writing her youthful memoirs, destined to master the stage a few years after her return from Surinam. To determine who – or what – *this* Behn was, and how she differed from the Behn of drama and English life, I investigate the measures she employed to claim Oroonoko *as herself*. I almost believe that Oroonoko knows himself for what he is: the creation of an “unreliable Narrator” and a literary fiction. If so, then Oroonoko already knows that he will be written out of the story, finished when Behn has done; at close this hero will be swept away with his wife and mistress, mere dusting powder on the writer's table:

Thus died this great man, worthy of a better fate, and a more sublime wit than mine to write his praise. Yet, I hope, the reputation of my pen is considerable enough to make his glorious name to survive to all ages, with that of the brave, the beautiful and the constant Imoinda. (1953: 86)

When I read this story now, the character of Oroonoko barely disguises his creator: I find Behn's hands and face(s) everywhere, strangely disfigured. For instance, this description of Oroonoko early on remarks on the slave's European appearance:¹⁰

But though I had heard so much of him, I was as greatly surprised when I saw him, as if I had heard nothing of him; so beyond all report I found him

[...] His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat: his mouth the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turn'd lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. The whole proportion and air of his face was so nobly and exactly form'd that, bating his colour, there could be nothing in nature more beautiful, agreeable and handsome. There was no one grace wanting, that bears the standard of true beauty. His hair came down to his shoulders [...] (Behn 1953: 8)

Obviously, despite his European physiognomy, the female Behn does not physically resemble her Prince. But I feel she has concealed herself before her contemporaries as the slave in (and to) her writing, and as the hero. Oroonoko is a character in which Behn as a female writer might safely efface herself without giving herself up to dishonesty; Behn could equate herself with the mysterious resonance of this Other. Female sexuality is the dream of men, while women believe the “trick” of themselves as “dark continents”:

[...] because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark, you are afraid. Don't move, you might fall. Above all, don't go into the forest. And we have internalized this fear of the dark. Women haven't had eyes for themselves [...] Their sex still frightens them. Their bodies, which they haven't dared enjoy, have been colonized. Woman is disgusted by woman and fears her.

(Cixous and Clement 1986: 67–68)

Superficially nothing like Behn, Oroonoko contains Behn's difference; he is her mirror:

I knew he spoke French and English [...] Oroonoko was as capable of reigning well, and of governing as wisely, had as great a soul, as politick maxims, and was as sensible of power, as any Prince civiliz'd in the most refined schools [...] (1953: 8–9)

Behn's attraction to Oroonoko is not engendered by his blackness but despite it: the prince represents her colonial familiar. It is to Behn's credit that she is able to sublimate race, but she does not (as some have argued) champion it.¹¹

Prior to his capture and torture by the West Indian planters, the hero is Oroonoko, a man educated to a degree tantamount to an English lord; for much of the story Behn calls him “Caesar,” the name given him by the slave-owner who imported him from Africa:

I ought to tell you that the Christians never buy any slaves but they give 'em some name of their own, their native ones being likely very barbarous, and hard to pronounce; so that Mr. Trefry [his buyer] gave Oroonoko that of Caesar; which name will live in that country as long as that (scarce more)

glorious one of the great Roman: for 'tis most evident he wanted no part of the personal courage of that Caesar [...] (1953: 45)

An abolitionist tract cleverly disguised as a novel, its diatribes against slavery are softened by the specificity of the hero whom the narrator has befriended: Behn does not contest *all* enslavement, but all *royal* enslavement. Behn's loyalty to the colonial project does not diminish with this evidence of the abuse of power: in fact, "Oroonoko is," as Anne Fogarty points out, "a tragic figure because he is a dispossessed king – not because he is a man denied his freedom" (2000: 5). The scene in which Prince Oroonoko (as the slave named Caesar) is publicly whipped is not only vividly and horrifically described but condemned as inhumane and dehumanising, as if Caesar's soul were scarred by the lash. Behn is not content merely to speak for the Other: rather, the Other becomes one with her. Under the aegis of friendship and narrative authority, *Oroonoko's* black hero and heroine carefully alchemise into Europeans with dark skin – and not just any black skin, but the blackness of "perfect ebony, or polished jett" (Behn 1953: 8). This description has the effect of producing the complexion of black marble, and thus the planes and lines of classical statuary, guiding the reader to align Behn's prince with a Greek god.¹²

The narrator is equally fond of Imoinda, treating her as a traditional heroine by praising her beauty, grace and charm – without ever suggesting what she looks like. Behn ignores the "exotic" excesses written into most colonial narratives of native women: Imoinda is covered from head to foot.¹³ She is in part desirable because her Otherness is so like the (assumed) reader's own: even Behn's depiction of Oroonoko and Imoinda as lovers is restrained, a model of physical intimacy – particularly given the stereotypes then (as now) abounding about "island fever" and the availability of indigenous flesh. Behn imparts a Renaissance woman's sensibility to these transplanted Africans; for Oroonoko and Imoinda, as for Behn's readers, chastity is of paramount importance:

'Tis not to be imagined the satisfaction of these two young lovers; nor the vows she made him, that she remained a spotless maid till that night, and that what she did with his grandfather had *robb'd him of no part of her virgin-honour*; the gods, in mercy and justice, having reserved that for her plighted lord, to whom *of right it belonged*.

(Behn 1953: 26, my emphasis)¹⁴

Apart from couching her own alterity in radical Otherness, Behn's ulterior motive is to teach her readers to respect difference. At times appearing like modern-day ethnography, the novel *Oroonoko* remarks on kinship, customs and above all morality. For instance, Behn writes of Imoinda:

Oh! she is never to be retrieved. If I wou'd wait tedious years; till fate shou'd bow the old King to his grave, even that wou'd not leave me Imoinda free;

but still that custom that makes it so vile a crime for a son to marry his father's wives or mistresses, wou'd hinder my happiness [...] (1953: 15)

Structurally unnecessary for the movement of the plot, the anti-Oedipal exclamation offers yet another reminder of Oroonoko's civility – with an assurance that what is taboo in England is just as taboo in Africa. Even the old king (Oroonoko's grandfather), who blindly seeks to interrupt the happiness of the young lovers, is depicted as a jealous old fool rather than a melodramatic villain; like old men in Restoration comedies, his advances are pathetic rather than injurious. Although the King nightly assaults Imoinda in his royal “seraglio,” once her virtue is firmly in the possession of Oroonoko her perceived danger abates: “she” – or that precious “it” – is safe.

The First Person Singular

The story of *Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave* begins with “I” and ends with “Imoinda,” the name of Oroonoko's “true” Mistress (actually, his “Heroick wife”). In between the story lies (in both senses). The “I” who returns at the literal end of Oroonoko (man and tale) makes a somewhat abrupt appearance as a narrating character. Due to her period and gender one might expect Behn to locate herself in her female character, but Behn's temperament is nothing like Imoinda's; she does not sublimate herself as the “I” of Imoinda. This is apparent in the passage when Imoinda and Oroonoko come together:

[...] the awfulness wherewith she receiv'd him, and the sweetness of her words and behaviour while he stay'd, gain'd a perfect conquest over his fierce heart, and made him feel, the victor cou'd be subdu'd. So that having made his first compliments, and presented her with his eyes, that he was not insensible of her charms; while Imoinda, who wish'd for nothing more than so glorious a conquest, was pleas'd to believe, she understood that silent language of newborn love [...] (1953: 9–10)

Unlike Behn, whose novel at end immodestly screams its violence, Imoinda understands and even practices silence, the forbearance of the *modest* woman. For this reason I wonder what Behn really means to say about this paragon of womanhood, a woman who will not speak for herself. Behn's heroine stands in neither for the writer nor the “I” of the text. Perhaps Behn writes Imoinda satirically, naming the *negative* of her own image.¹⁵

Excavating this final “I,” a name much more (or less) than “I,” recovers interesting choices; the name broken into its constituent parts:

- 1.) Im-o-inda
- 2.) I-moi-nda

3.) I-moin-da

The first may draw reference to Imoinda's origins: "I am of Inda" (although Imoinda is, of course, not West Indian but African) is a contracted English, strange for the period but possibly close to Caribbean *patois*. More strategically, Behn may be encoding a reference to yet another woman – her contemporary, the poet Kathleen Phillips, known to all as the "matchless Orinda." This possibility is the more compelling, as Phillips – most unlike Behn – refused to publish her poetry, aware that the "public" life of "Astraea's" characters is a reference to the immodesty of female *publication*. "The alternative to 'hiding' one's work," says Harold Love, "would often be to find a metaphorical equation drawn between an eagerness to appear in print and sexual immorality" (1993: 54–55).

The second variation on "Imoinda" reminds readers that the writer earned the larger portion of her income from translations from French to English: the name "Imoinda" in French suggests repetition of the English "I" as direct object – that is, *moi* (me). The last, leftover syllable *nda* may be further broken (although this is admittedly far-fetched) into *nd* and *a*, affording an accepted abbreviation for *Notre Dame* and a preposition: *a* means "against," "without," or "unless." Once patched together – "I" + "me" + (a part of) + "Our lady" – it is far less cryptic, and quite poetic.

But the most likely of these hallucinations is the third: *I moin de. A moin de* constitutes a phrase. Parsed in English, I find either "Less of I (me)" or "Less than I,"¹⁶ a witty reminder of Behn's body hidden in the blackness of the Other. The name is also a homonym for the French comparative – *moindre* – or "less than," "least," and (one might say) "last." She begins with "I" and ends at last with less, at least – and risks neglecting Imoinda's role as a self-conscious apparatus in the text, a site for Behn to rest her "I."

Adding to One

The respite comes just in time. At this point Behn writes herself as newly conquered by the prince. And the story has only begun; she has not lived out the torments of the novel and her relationship with its tragic character. Shortly after this, Behn shows her narrative hand, resorting to the conceit of the (limited) omniscient narrator in the moment of lovemaking, when Oroonoko first penetrates to Imoinda's chamber. Behn's sudden absence from the text is a virginal blush:

The Prince softly waken'd Imoinda, who was not a little surpriz'd with joy to find him there (in her bed in the King's palace); and yet she trembled with a thousand fears. I believe he omitted saying nothing to this young maid, that might persuade her to suffer him to seize his own, and take the rights of love. And I believe she was not long resisting those arms where she so long'd to be; and having opportunity, night, and silence, youth, love, and desire, he

soon prevail'd, and ravished in a moment what his old grandfather had been endeavouring for so many months. (1953: 26)

Behn's "uncertainty" as to the facts of the seduction constitutes one of her fictions, but becomes forgivable when read as modesty for her own virtue, body and pen. By the end of the tale the transgender of the narrator (and "I's" closure) will be complete. To perform this self-erasure and engrave herself with the character of Oroonoko, Behn must rid the story of Imoinda. Behn does this by killing Imoinda with her own lover's hand:

[W]hile tears trickled down his cheeks, hers were smiling with joy she should die by so noble a hand, and be sent into her own country (for that's their notion of the next world) by him so tenderly loved, and so truly ador'd in this [...] (Behn 1953: 80)

Her attention bent upon the beloved of Oroonoko rather than Oroonoko himself, Behn is now sublimated in Imoinda, stinking under a bed of leaves, heroically and humbly dealt her death blow by her prince because he is also to die and wishes to save her from Fate's ravages (or, more specifically, the violent attentions of the Governor, Trefry and the wild Irish Banister). In this death the lovers are more truly united than ever they could be in life, as "the lovely, young and ador'd victim lays herself down before the sacrificer; while he [...] gave the fatal stroke, first cutting her throat, and then severing her yet smiling face from that delicate body" (Behn 1953: 80).

I/she ends as a face severed from a body, a disembodied narrator, wife to the Word. A slave to the story, if you will: Behn was also a reporter of news. How else were a white woman and a black man, even a "Prince," to come together in that time? Behn's biographer notes, "[P]resumably because she had shown such total sympathy for him," when Behn herself was dead "One of the Fair Sex felt forced to defend her against the charge of being Oroonoko's mistress" (Duffy 1977: 55). Through death the lovers are literarily conjoined in the same body, a romance of the spirit. Arguably the process of Behn's transference from Imoinda/I to Oroonoko, from *alpha* to *omega*, preceded Imoinda's murder: Imoinda is pregnant with Oroonoko's child. The body she carries is more symbolic of their union than the body she offers him. Oroonoko's horrible burden is to kill both his present and any hope of a future. The action requires a transformation denied the physical body but possible as literary sleight of hand. Unable to resume his life, Oroonoko stays with his wife's body, hoping to accompany it into death. Yet the life force in him – and his rage – is far too strong (understandably so, as it is Behn's); at this rupture I feel Behn's "I" upon him, the blood rising. Simultaneously *she* is affected by *his* blood, their sanguinity. From this point forward, Behn *is* Oroonoko.

False Witness

At the Prince's end, the narrative "I" suddenly leaves, prey to a most mysterious illness – as Behn confesses:

[Oroonoko's] discourse was sad; and the earthy smell about him so strong, that I was persuaded to leave the place for some time, (being myself but sickly, and very apt to fall into fits of dangerous illness upon any extraordinary melancholy). (1953: 84–85)

She, as he, is sick with death; the melancholy driving Behn to sudden sickness is none other than the danger her friend faces. Even, or especially so, to absent herself while knowing that Oroonoko's enemies have already threatened him with death makes no compassionate sense. Yet Behn is indeed physically absent when Oroonoko is re-taken to be killed, and again absent at the death of Imoinda. She relates Imoinda's death as a second-hand hearer, having had the story from Oroonoko and tells of Oroonoko's capture as a *third-hand* hearer, having heard the tale from one as "noble" and forthright (but more present) as she/he. Despite the narrative obstacle of her own defection, Behn reports Imoinda's and Oroonoko's deaths as if from the same narrative *locus*, geographically and spiritually the story's continuous narrator.

Southerne also wondered at Behn's choices in *Oroonoko*, claiming that to submerge the (female) narrative self while restoring the (male) Hero would have strengthened the novel: "she had a great command of the stage (yet I) often wondered that she would bury her favourite hero in a novel when she might have revived him in a scene" (Southerne 1976: 4). This is, of course, Southerne's revisionist ploy, and in a letter to his patron Southerne boasts of solving that problem:

She thought either that no actor could represent [Oroonoko], or she could not bear him represented [...] she always told his story more feelingly than she writ it. Whatever happened to him at Surinam, he has mended his condition in England. (1976: 4)

In this compact passage Southerne comments on the narrator's association with her own fiction, and a character she cannot (despite her professional and creative abilities) fully articulate in writing. Southerne's remarks draw attention to Behn's *embodiment* of the narrative in writing and in person, suggesting he was aware of a connection between character and author that was not simply explained.

In the dramatic version of *Oroonoko*, Southerne removes the narrator and her female influence, claiming the work's authorship as his own. Southerne's assertion that "I stand engaged to Mrs Behn" for the premise of *The Fatal Marriage, Or, The Innocent Adultery* (1694), his previous play, accompany and to some degree neutralise his awareness of a debt to *Oroonoko*. The comment does less to recognise Behn's influence than to remind the reader of Southerne's favoured

authorship, and his authority over Behn's story. Yet he is unable to completely rid himself of her; and, in his adaptation of her tale into a tragic play (Southerne 1976: xiii), implements Behn's presence in Surinam – turning it into a comic plot. This supposed sub-plot threatens to erase the tragedy of Oroonoko's story (carried out, in marked distinction to the conversationality of the comic portions, in lugubrious verse), as when Welldon and Stanmore break off briefly to note “a mutiny among the slaves” (Southerne 1976: 86) before resuming their courtship.

In Southerne's play, the Lieutenant Governor of the colony is explicitly after Imoinda, whom he calls “Clemene” (1976: 46–49), having become smitten with her on sight. Ironically, the Governor engineers his own loss: by urging the Prince to corroborate his choice – not knowing that the beautiful slave is already carrying Oroonoko's child – he brings Oroonoko together with Imoinda. Far from adulating Behn's “black Venus,” Southerne's answer to the apparent desirability of Imoinda was to make her white (xxxvii), presumably increasing her acceptability to theatre audiences. Behn remained a curiosity for Southerne, as well as a dramatic possibility: Southerne himself acknowledged the bond between the “character” of Behn and Oroonoko by inserting “Charlotte” – an innovation not found in the original text. One might have expected the Charlotte character to be a noble narrator or friend, particularly given the tradition of the dramatic *confidante* prior to this period. Instead Charlotte is remarkably similar to Behn's own salaciously written characters from drama – as well as Behn herself. While such a character *type* is unremarkable in the genre, given the circumstances it is a suggestive and biting stroke: doubling Charlotte as the male character “Welldon,” Southerne succeeds in placing Behn in breeches! Thus Behn is made to transform into a man (her own cousin Welldon) and back into a woman (Charlotte) in order to organise her own happy marriage to Welldon's best friend. In Welldon's flirtation as the “handsome gentleman” whom Widow Lackitt desires, the disguised Charlotte remarks, “I shall never have such an offer again, that's certain. What shall I do? I am mightily divided” (Southerne 1976: 35). Welldon's drollery, ostensibly referring to his hidden sexuality, seems to comment on Behn's multiplicity of character. The play's premiere (late in 1695) also concretised the affinity between Behn's principal characters onstage, featuring the famous John Verbruggen as the African prince and Verbruggen's actress-wife Susanna as Charlotte/Welldon (Southerne 1976: 8–9), a provocative enactment of supposition.

Southerne also recognises the connection – one often made by Behn in her writings – between women and slaves, and of marriage as a (more) financially desirable form of indenture. When the Captain, a slaver, makes a monetary bid for the hand of Lucy, the (“male”) Welldon comments on the proposed transaction: “This is your market for slaves; my sister is a free woman and must not be disposed of in public” (Southerne 1976: 27). But Southern resolves the “rebellion,” as Lucy says later: “I don't know what confinement marriage may be to the men, but I'm sure the women have no liberty without it. I am for anything that will deliver me from the care of a reputation, which I begin to find impossible to preserve” (1976: 37–38).

In contrast, Behn associates authorship with heroism and, therefore, with Oroonoko: as she writes, “I value Fame as much as if I had been born a Hero” (Behn 1990: pref.). She, therefore, ascribes the tale’s true authorship to its primary character. This may be consistent with the hyperbolic language of patronage but nonetheless threatens erasure of the narrator’s own voice. Behn candidly shares Caesar’s marginality with any (heroic) recognition accruing to the writer, stating, “[Oroonoko’s] misfortune was, to fall in an obscure world, that afforded only a female pen to celebrate his fame” (1953: 45) – false modesty. Her narrative authority is patently Oroonoko’s freedom, but in her anonymous female weakness (Behn succumbs to a mysterious illness) becomes complicit with those who bring bloody harm to Oroonoko. She vanishes. Although Behn is not there, something of her assuredly remains: her account loses nothing in its vividness or fidelity to detail, merely becoming terser, as if her wind were gone. What this suggests to me is that Oroonoko is Behn’s double, and can only die *in her absence*. Behn leaves the story, writing herself out, in order to permit Oroonoko’s execution.

Behn quickly, prosaically, relates the matter and manner of death and, having thus dispatched him, closes the book with an unusually spare (and cryptic?) evocation of Imoinda, making Behn sound as if *she* is Imoinda’s Lover. Oroonoko’s voice becomes the voice of “I” in transubstantiation. Imoinda is able to die at Oroonoko’s hand, and Oroonoko to die at Behn’s. It is also significant that in his capture and death Behn refers to Oroonoko as Caesar, evoking the slave name. This may be intentional distancing: Behn’s modest “I” prevents her from eye-witnessing Oroonoko’s scene of love, modesty or compassion keeping her from his scene of death. In fact “I” may have heard of Oroonoko’s capture and slaughter from her mother and sister – two women who enter the story strangely near its completion: no doubt Behn knows better than to introduce one, let alone two, characters at the end of a tale. Their identification as family members leads me to question where have they been all this time, as well as what constitutes Behn’s family relations: in much of the story the narrator speaks only of the prince (and his wife) with affection, and fails to mention any blood ties. The characters may be family to “I” (Behn herself) or familiar fictions. If mother and sister are part of Behn’s household, then another singular absence occurs in the narrator’s failure to mention Behn’s father (the purpose for the family’s jaunt to Surinam). Scholars know that Behn’s father had recently died, but this tells us little about the father of “I” (and this *is* a fiction, or so we are told).¹⁷

One possible reason for the appearance of “mother and sister” is Behn’s preparation of the reader for the story’s sad ending, where Behn makes another odd departure, linking her hero with ancient history by quoting another source. In the final tableau Oroonoko the Prince stands erect against a stake, attended by two women (“mother and sister”) as the rabble humiliates and forswears him. The reliance upon Golgothan imagery displaces Behn still more, transforming her by symbolic extension to a chronicler of gospels, a devotee, converted to apostle-hood and (finally) one with the absent god Itself. Behn’s Absence is that of an absent messiah, and the (unspoken) “Why have you forsaken me?” might be spo-

ken by the martyr present. Behn concludes this elemental but trite picture without restoring Oroonoko's particular nobility, earlier embraced by (her) audience and (his) subjects, and the prince's final scene in the role of Jesus does not ring true to life. Older, stronger myths have already been invoked: compared to Zeus and the Titans, Jesus was an effeminate, in fact feminine, personage. But this may be Behn's purpose in materialising Jesus in *Oroonoko*.¹⁸

None of this is made overt or overly important; Behn does not so much call attention to as she does away from herself. She is gone at the very moment of "Caesar's" death without a hint of self-reproach, or even an acknowledgment of great sorrow. The reader cannot know how Behn comes by her dispossession; the absence of her body from the event parallels the absence of emotion in its telling.¹⁹ It would seem Behn herself undergoes a great transformation, suffering a sensory loss. She does not wrap up the tale as she does her plays, with a surfeit of smug happiness, but suddenly ends without even the page or two of moral soliloquy customary for the time (evident in *Oroonoko's* opening prose). It seems Behn is anxious to be done with the story, as if – now that the violent and marketable excitement of the tale is gone – the woman who, after all, writes for a living knows that there is nothing left in the tale to exploit.

Behn's concern may be for her readers, herself, or for the memory of "Caesar" (who directs us back to Behn). In *Oroonoko's* end nothing is left to chance; Imoinda will not be subjected to Oroonoko's enemies; Oroonoko will neither ripen into old age nor suffer reiteration of the whip. I do not know what will happen to Behn (the Behn of the "I," of notable absence), but the story's gruesome symbolism is instructive. Oroonoko construes whipping as indignity, but queerly does not feel the same about public execution: while he is unwilling to endure torture on its own, he submits to torture leading to death. That death is anything but decorous: Oroonoko is terminated slowly, in one of the most painful methods imaginable. Again, I do not know what this means to Behn. As the townspeople look on, Oroonoko is cut and pulled apart, immolated, thrown to the animals. He is parted out, as disembodied as Behn herself.

Selling the Body

By the time this happens, Oroonoko has lost everything including his name. Behn implicitly acknowledges her character's duality and destruction in the way she refers to him: "For the future therefore I must call Oroonoko Caesar; since by that name only he was known in our western world, and by that name was received on shore at Parham-House, where he was destin'd a slave" (Behn 1953: 45–46). I feel that, given Behn's hatred for slavery, there is no justification for the unseen narrator's sudden switch to Oroonoko's slave name. Behn does not seem to know²⁰ that such a naming, while it may seem apt for a prince, is representative of white owners' mockery of black men: the practice of naming slaves by inflated titles continued in the United States right up to the abolition of slavery ("duke,"

“Caesar,” “Ramses” and names of American presidents being among the favourite choices). “I” does not forthrightly profess an understanding of economics, but Oroonoko himself understands his place in that system and straightway assumes the trappings of his captivity:

[...] he had a rich habit on, in which he was taken, so different from the rest, and which the captain cou'd not strip him of, because he was forc'd to surprize his person in the minute he sold him. When he found his habit made him liable, as he thought, to be gazed at the more, he begged Trefry to give him something more befitting a slave, which he did, and took off his robes.

(Behn 1953: 45)

In an era dedicated to personal display through dress, coiffure, makeup and deportment, Oroonoko self-consciously becomes Caesar by changing his clothing, in a quintessential gesture of making and marking the Other, and losing the Self. Oroonoko's conversion to slavery is, however, incomplete: the newly christened “Caesar” is unable to disguise his manner, a condition of his royal birth. In Behn's time social position was genetically encoded, thus “nevertheless, he shone thro all [...] The Royal Youth appear'd in spight of the slave [...]” (1953: 45).

Modern readers must resist imputing a false politic to writers in our or other times. Behn was not (for instance) a Marxist but prey to the operation of ownership and exchange in which women's bodies are standard currency. Her interest in this was compounded annually, her profits largely due to her own exploitation of female flesh. Behn's comedies have been cited, in fact, as containing more breech roles than any other Restoration playwright, a display of feminine leg that, in Hugh Hunt's oft-quoted phrase, “had the effect on the male audience of a bombshell” (Diamond 1989a: ff. 12). Yet her purpose in this brand of exploitation is problematic. The writer articulated her disapprobation with the role of women offstage, and it is questionable whether she meant her *scripted* nudities as subversions, a dramatic exposure of contemporary signs, or was astutely participating in the prevailing economy (Behn 1990; Duffy 1977; Diamond 1989b; Southerne 1976: ff 96). Characters such as Hellena and even Angelica in *The Rover*, and the narrative “I” in *Oroonoko*, deliver very different and transgressive messages regarding the evolution and evaluation of women. One of my intentions is to urge readers to reconsider Behn's contribution to the forging of female identity itself.

Behn's politics regarding slavery is far less complicated: slave-owners are not ennobled but stand morally inferior to their captives; black men are educable, and sometimes already educated, well beyond their owners; possession of any Self but one's own is a crime against nature. Bearing this in mind, readers can recognize the irony inscribed in Oroonoko's torture. Before reaching the final tableaux the reader must also witness what Behn's “I” eschews: the cruel joke which the white lords play upon the prince when he has given himself up to them, presumably for death, and to escape whipping. The masters' first act is to attempt to deconstruct Oroonoko's gender (rendering him more fully Caesar); having gelded

him, they consign his private parts to the fire. Bent upon a brutality surpassing emasculation, they continue to disfigure the man. Meanwhile, as if advertising the trade which murders him,²¹ the slave requests, and smokes, tobacco:

He had learn'd to take tobacco; and when he was assur'd he should die, he desir'd they would give him a pipe in his mouth, ready lighted; which they did. And the executioner came, and first cut off his members, and threw them into the fire; and after that, with an ill-favour'd knife, they cut off his ears and his nose, and burn'd them; he still smoked on, as if nothing had touch'd him; then they hack'd off one of his arms, and still he bore up and held his pipe; but at the cutting off the other arm, his head sunk, and his pipe dropt, and he gave up the ghost, without a groan, or a reproach. (Behn 1953: 86)

The “I” records a hideous scene: determined to separate the man from society, his social “superiors” cut him into gory segments. Behn frames it in silence and smoke.

It is easy enough to regard this scene as a proto-Freudian allegory: although the white lords first dispatch the slave’s genitals, the pipe stands in for his manhood – until that, at last, also “dropt.” I suggest another reading. “He had learn’d to take tobacco.” Smoking is not only the custom of Oroonoko’s captors, but a habit dependent upon slavery, a second tier of business. His very enslavement is, therefore, embodied in this gesture, perfectly condensed. These are the tobacco lords, and the devils of rum: the traffic in plantation crops is the traffic in dark flesh, the produce of one being the limbs of the Other. This is a moment of cannibalism, of self-eating self, akin to Roman Nero’s fantastic fiddling as fire consumed his empire: Caesar Oroonoko smokes his own darkness. The taking of tobacco is the taking of Oroonoko, Royal Youth; to harvest darkness, whiteness must first harvest the Other. Human history is written in this way, slavery’s volumes printed on scrolls of cane sugar and leaves of green tobacco, human crops. Or on the slave’s back, the manuscript of terror reigned with a whip (Baker 1989). In the machine of economy, nothing exists apart from ownership. Earth’s flesh is also enchained. Sale of bodies is sale to bodies, with owners meting out the fruits of addiction and seduction.

In the last scene Oroonoko, whose name and body are already conscripted, codes of a foreign economy, is reduced to smoke: like the “I” before him, he also disappears. Having no further business to conduct, its dark pupil gone, the absent narrative “I” closes. The last thing the reader sees, the final word, is “Imoinda.” But she is absent as well.

A Question of Identity

Achille Mbembe writes about the *post*-colony as an “economy of death” (1992: 14), but the colony itself is built upon death, its economy an architecture of murder in which body, tongue and culture are enslaved, slavery being akin if not synonymous with colonisation. Clearly my discussion of the commercialisation of

tobacco, now clinically linked to a variety of diseases, is also pertinent. Mbembe goes on to say that “the *work* of power [...] involves a process of ‘enchantment’ in order to produce ‘fable’” (1992: 15), by which he interrogates colonisation’s invitation to myth and the creation of new culture on the bones of the old. And although I do not directly treat it in this article, Behn’s work, coincidentally dealing with the obscenity of colonization, “enchants” me. This is the work of all literature, but also precisely why the identity of the seeing “I” is so important.

Behn’s absence is a literary about-face: she no longer trusts her readers to make a correct judgment, but makes the point herself with a heavy hand by importing a Christian rationale to the re-resolution of the story, imparting a martyred sensibility to Caesar, and marring an otherwise extraordinary, even mythical, tale. This Rousseauian attempt at a moral end is not, however, my only difficulty with the “truth” of Behn’s report. I have not yet determined how the narrative “I” arrived at *any* description of Caesar’s final moments. Some clearly took part in the savagery, some did not (though these are unnamed); that does not yet explain by what source Behn received her information, how many of those *present* passed it to her, or how dependably. Behn deliberately assures the reader that she received her story “from the Hero himself,” ostensibly validating her claim of verity: she is “eye Witness,” the single “I.” She does not allow for any exceptions in the narrative continuity, or correct herself anywhere in the text, but the question remains: in the final scene, Behn is absent and the Hero is present – if only in parts. A deep and absolute silence attends Caesar’s tragic finish, conclusive because irrevocable, absolute because impenetrable.

Which leaves me to wonder what, in the mysterious disappearance of Behn, really transpired, to what extent this Truth, this History, deviates from the character of Reality. Behn would seem to have damaged her own credibility with a too-constant assurance of veracity, “mimetic function being a vehicle of ideology that debilitates the spectator’s critical capacities” (Scheie 1992: 181). Possibly Behn withholds some report, inserting instead this false sacrifice, denying an essential moment in History – or an historical fiction – through the device of her own uncharacteristic absence. If I believe in Behn so totally that I subscribe to another view of the “Truth” – and find her guilty of lying at the end – then I must name the Truth she tells, isolate its strange couplings and metaphors. To know this, I must determine at what juncture the very absence of woman becomes her identity – a contradiction that appears in Joan Riviere’s work:

Womanliness [...] could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it – much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not stolen the goods. The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the “masquerade.” My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.
(1966: 213)

Behn sublimates as narrator, rarely calling attention to herself, engrossed instead in the story; eventually her body is subsumed in Oroonoko and the telling of his story. Her final emergence at Oroonoko's end is one of self-promotion, rather like a dreamer who wakes before plunging from the cliff: she must not die. But the character of the Narrator "I," as noted earlier, is weak, and less interesting than her exotic counterpart; the Narrator's late return (in both respects) ill caps the drama. It is as if readers realise a door is closing only as we discover the body, merely glimpsed as the doorway narrows to nothing. Behn's parting remarks are so brief and ineffectual as to seem truncated, edited away; she is de-polemicalised, de-problematised. Now, all of this is only partly true: Behn's body is quite as exotic as Oroonoko's. But only if she is restored, put back together again, and into the Restoration. Reconsidering Behn as a product of her own culture, it is plain that she is at least as *rara avis* as her unhappy prince Oroonoko, and perhaps more so.

Despite the expectations placed upon educated women to write their memoirs, to actually *be* "belles lettres" – a task which undoubtedly prepares Behn for her transformation in *Oroonoko* – Behn remains a Dark Continent. "We, coming early to culture, repressed and choked by it, our beautiful mouths stopped up with gags, pollen, and short breaths; we the labyrinths, we the ladders, we the trampled spaces; the stolen and the flights – we are 'black' *and* we are beautiful" (Cixous 1986: 69).

In the last moments of Oroonoko's life, the narrator must return, take up her place – if not physically, in order to bear witness, then metaphysically or literarily, in order to conclude the story. Regardless of who Oroonoko really is, *Oroonoko* is Behn's story. Behn provides sparse conclusion, hardly the voluptuous report with which readers enter the tale. Behn gives only enough to restore herself, replacing the savagery of Surinam with the voice of bonny England. As if, closing her diary as the ship rolls out of the harbour, seeing behind her familiar faces becoming dense forest, she pauses a moment to contemplate the shape of her world from the insulation of her female body, with its own black secrets. As ocean and sky become one, islands become memories, and sailing ships head for the stars.

Notes

- 1 For an intensive discussion of the significance and symbolism of the "vizard" mask, see "Off to See the Vizard, or, Masking Desire on the Restoration Stage," pp. 71–100 of Rob Baum's *Female Absence: Women, Theatre and Other Metaphors* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2003).
- 2 Surinam passed into Dutch hands later; for an account of the colony's population under the Dutch, see Jacob R. Marcus and Stanley F. Chyet, eds., *Historical Essay on the Colony of Surinam 1788* (1974), originally published in Amsterdam. The authors record a slave rebellion that, while not coinciding with the one in *Oroonoko*, grants some credence to the story.
- 3 In the same period, the English queen donated her own coronation robes to the theatre: the confluence between royal pomp and stage illusion was publicly recognized and politically (ad-)dressed. The Queen, however, could well afford the gift.
- 4 Ironically, not very much later this same institution would be perceived as lowly, even bawdy.

- 5 Dryden was to write the prologue and epilogue for her last play, *The Widow Ranter*, which was considered too controversial even for Behn's *oeuvre*, and was produced posthumously in November 1689. The play was a failure.
- 6 Behn uses such names as "Parham House" and "Oroonoko" as local quotations to give her work flavour and "authenticity": Surinam is bounded on the north by the Orinoco River, and "Parhams-Punt" (later corrupted as "Bramspunt") designates a large mud-bank on the Surina, or Surinam River.
- 7 The theatres were closed under Puritan rule in 1642, and opened with the King's return. By late 1660, two theatre companies were operating: the King's Company (managed by Thomas Killigrew) in Vere Street and later Drury Lane, and the Duke's Company (under Sir William Davenant, or D'Avenant) in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Samuel Pepys records the first (licensed) performance by women in England, on 3 January 1661 (Pepys 2000: II, 4–5).
- 8 Public recognition of a woman constitutes a form of scandal akin to prostitution, but without the dividends.
- 9 The work of Thomas Southerne is only one, more obvious, example.
- 10 This comparison of Africans and Europeans may be based upon an idea then in circulation. Chroncling life in London, Samuel Pepys notes in his diary, "Captain Minnes and the other Captains that were with us tell me that negros drowned look white and lose their blacknesse – which I never heard before" (11 April 1662, Pepys 2000: III, 63).
- 11 For a view of Behn's "emancipatory" writing, see especially Elaine Campbell's "Aphra Behn's Surinam Interlude" (1985), Moira Ferguson's "*Oroonoko*: Birth of a Paradigm" (1992), and Vron Ware's *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (1992).
- 12 Or, as the late Professor Robert Egan once suggested to me, with "a Stuart king" (Private conversation; UC Santa Barbara, 1995). The story of *Oroonoko* was first published in the year of King James II's deposition from the English throne; James was the last of the Stuart kings.
- 13 The actual description is a far cry from Iris Francis' illustrations for the Folio Society publication of 1953. Page 22 of this version shows Imoinda falling into Oroonoko's arms while wearing something like a toga; one of her breasts is completely bared. Such anachronistic and sordid illustrations, particularly placed adjacent to a primly restrained text, additionally illustrate the meaning of words like "primitivism" and "Orientalism."
- 14 Perhaps upholding the contemporary notion that darkness infers villainy, Behn's only other tragedy, the drama *Abdelazer, or The Moor's Revenge*, also features a "Moorish" principal, this time the antagonist of the title. In any case, exotic birth clearly betokens tragic death.
- 15 Other names found in Behn's novel are taken from historical figures and *loci*. "Oroonoko" is a river in Surinam (ff. 2); "Treffrey" was a slave owner (ff. 7). The name and person of "Imoinda" appear to be complete inventions.
- 16 I thank the late Professor Bert States for this lovely translation. I fear that I have inadequately rendered a most interesting consideration that, though one might not set it on Behn's head, may be laid at the feet of a modern reader.
- 17 I share the doubt to which Duffy admits in her biography: "There is still hope that Oroonoko himself may be more, or less, than a magnificent fiction" (1977: 25).
- 18 It is also possible, as Dr. Chris Worth suggests, that the source for this scene is anti-Spanish *conquistador* imagery (Private conversation; Melbourne, 2004).
- 19 Todd offers another explanation of this reflective absence: "One kind of meta-artistic expression for women seems [...] to need the absence of the female body as well as the absence of the spectator, with the result that the voice of the woman writer may be associated with another less femininely sexualized part and be heard without titillation" (1993: 22).
- 20 Duffy (1977) indicates that Treffrey (her spelling of the name: he is an historical character) gave his slave the name out of genuine admiration. This is the part of Blanford in Southerne's play.
- 21 Caesar has likely been transported to work in the sugar-cane trade; even today the West Indies are known for rum. But it is quite possible that the exploitative reference to tobacco as the work of slavery is intended by Behn: her final play, *The Widow Ranter*, which also features "Indians" and "Negroes," is set in Virginia, tobacco country.

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