

# Mrs A. Behn and the Myth of Oroonoko-Imoinda

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How long wilt thou go about, O thou backsliding daughter? for the Lord hath created a new thing in the earth, A woman shall compass a man.

Jeremiah 31:22

All I ask is the Privilege for my masculine Part the Poet in me ... to tread in those successful Paths my Predecessors have so long thrived in.<sup>1</sup>

Aphra Behn

If the act of writing is always in some sense an abbreviated form of walking, travelling/travailing, and exploring, then Aphra Behn's unconventional "Female Pen" reiterates the adventures of a highly unconventional female explorer and literary pioneer. Amid a resurgence of recent interest in her work, especially her short narratives, we are still in the process of discovering just how richly innovative Behn is as a narrative artist. *Oroonoko*, published in the explosive political atmosphere of 1688 (and a year before her death) is a thickly woven and delicately allusive verbal artifact. Behn was forty-eight at the time, poor, sick, suffering from a variety of diseases, and actively and intently rereading Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

1 Aphra Behn, Epistle Dedicatory to *The Lucky Chance* (1686).

2 For Behn's biographical record I rely chiefly on Angeline Goreau's *Reconstructing Aphra: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn* (New York: Dial Press, 1980). For Behn's intellectual encounter

She was exactly double the age of her free-spirited and socially privileged and powerful "Eyewitness," the younger self-as-character who participates in the crucial historical events of the narrative.<sup>3</sup>

*Oroonoko* is a vital text in the multifaceted birth of the novel. Behn prefigures Defoe's invention of the retrospective Moll Flanders looking back over an active and unconventional life, but her purpose is to inscribe the experience and significance of her "Slave" within her own closing life's circle. The narrator's role in *Oroonoko* calls attention to the elegiac power of a narrative redolent of paradisaical and gospel overtones in which Behn preserves for "Posterity" her godlike heroic pair—literally the first African-American protagonists in English fiction. While she may in part alleviate her own sense of guilt in their demise, at the same time she provides a cautionary literary and political fable for her dedicatee, the young nobleman Richard Maitland (nephew of the Lauderdale of Charles's Cabal) and his lady (another potentially important heroic pair), and for an England—and an English Catholic king—in crisis.

The title page of the first edition tells us that the author is "Mrs. A. Behn." Although Aphra Behn almost always signs her name "A. Behn" in the epistles dedicatory to her works, the "Mrs." [Mistress] here—whether her own addition or, as is more likely, the bookseller's—conceals a wealth of meaning present to a late-seventeenth-century audience.<sup>4</sup> "Mistress" was one of the few female words of power in this era, but of sharply

with Scripture and French biblical criticism in her translation and publication in early 1688 of Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (accompanied by her "Essay on Translated Prose"), see Maureen Duffy, *The Passionate Shepherdess: Aphra Behn 1640–89* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), pp. 270–74 and Robert Adams Day, "Aphra Behn and the Works of the Intellect," in *Fetter'd or Free: British Women Novelists, 1670–1815*, ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989), pp. 374–80. Of recent criticism (besides that cited elsewhere), I would like to note the following as the most pertinent to my concerns in this essay: Katharine M. Rogers, "Fact and Fiction in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Studies in the Novel* 20 (1988), 1–15; Robert L. Chibka, "'Oh! Do Not Fear a Woman's Invention': Truth, Falsehood, and Fiction in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 30 (1988), 510–37; Beverle Houston, "Usurpation and Dismemberment: Oedipal Tyranny in *Oroonoko*," *Literature and Psychology* 32 (1985), 30–36; Martine Watson Brownley, "The Narrator in *Oroonoko*," in *Essays in Literature* 4 (1977), 174–81; and Jacqueline Pearson, "Gender and Narrative in the Fiction of Aphra Behn," *Review of English Studies* 5 (Feb. 1991), 40–56 and 5 (May 1991), 179–90, especially 184–90 for a sensitive account of the narrator's ambivalence.

3 Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave*, ed. Lore Metzger (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 1. References are to this edition.

4 Beginning in the second paragraph of *Oroonoko* ("the Hero ... gave us the whole Transaction of his Youth" [p. 1]) Behn, as "Mistress" of a special branch of "natural philosophy," is giving her own version of a "philosophical transaction" concerning a little-known race and region of the world, a "Curiosity" (though in the guise of a fiction) similar in topic and idiom to several communications in the pages of the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* in the first twenty years of its existence, including descriptions of exotic places: China (no. 180, 1686); the East and West Indies (no. 80, 1671–72); Jamaica (no. 36, 1668); the Antilles (no. 33, 1667–

ambivalent power. As the female equivalent of "Master," "Mistress" (see the *OED*) meant the female head of a household or family ("mistress of the house"), the female governor of a state or territory, a goddess, a woman who had mastered an art or branch of study, a female teacher, an author or creator, a woman who had command over a man's heart, and by extension, the more familiar sense of female paramour. It was also the conventional title of courtesy prefixed to the surname of a married or an unmarried woman in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1688 Mistress Aphra Behn, or her lively narrator, can lay claim to nearly all these meanings. Mistress Behn had mastered the craft of playwriting as well as novel-writing, she was a well-known poet and an able translator, and, as far as we can determine from the evidence, for a few months around 1663, a woman of considerable influence and authority in the British colony of Surinam, on the northern coast of South America. Behn's last great fictional character (and the only male protagonist in her novels), an idealized hero whose physical demise is a counterpart to her own, calls her "his *Great Mistress*" (p. 46). Men give Aphra Behn the title of "Mistress" whether they be booksellers, husbands, fellow playwrights, or her own hero. She modestly does not claim the title for herself.

In the Epistle Dedicatory (printed only in the first edition of 1688) to Richard Maitland (1653-95), the former Lord Justice General of England in 1681 and the future fourth Earl of Lauderdale, Mistress Behn gives an unusually sophisticated account of her development as a creative artist.<sup>5</sup> She compliments her noble dedicatee (and narratee) as a scholar well read in "innumerable volumes of Men and Books," and she appeals to his knowledge of the arts, which makes him an ideal reader of the subsequent narrative. She likens her own inclusive creative method to that of a portrait painter who begins his creation by moving around and looking at the "Face" of his subject from many angles to find the most agreeable aspect for depiction. The "Face" will become the critical focal point in the relationship between Oroonoko and his true love, Imoinda, in the

68); Barbados (no. 117, 1676), and strange animals: the "Mexico Musk-Hog" (no. 153, 1683) and a variety of tropical birds. Concerning the use of "mistress," it is also noteworthy that Milton's Satan begins his final oratorical seduction of Eve—the one that wins her "heart"—with the appellation "sovrán Mistress" (*Paradise Lost*, IX.532), and that Defoe's original title for *Roxana* (1724) began with the words *The Fortunate Mistress*; the word "Mistress" in that novel has many of the connotations noted here, as well as that of "Mistress" to a single servant, the waiting-maid Amy.

5 The Epistle Dedicatory is printed as an appendix to vol. 5 of *The Works of Aphra Behn*, ed. Montague Summers (London, 1915; reprinted New York: Benjamin Blom, 1967), pp. 509-11.

narrative proper. In the Restoration, of course, "poet" could still designate any writer of imaginative literature. "A Poet is a Painter" too, the dedicatory goes on, but "we"—and now she equates herself with the verbal artist—draw to the life "in another kind; we draw the Nobler part, the Soul and Mind; the Pictures of the Pen shall out-last those of the Pencil, and even Worlds themselves." She begins with encompassing the outward image, and then goes deep inside. In Aphra Behn's androgynous presentation of her "self-as-writer," the poet—the "masculine Part" in her—can also be a "Historian" of those lives of "Men of Eminent Parts," as exemplary as monarchs themselves, who might otherwise be forgotten.<sup>6</sup> Echoing the title page's "True History," she tells Maitland that "this is a true Story," one we know she told many times to her friends. Thomas Southerne thought the oral version superior to the written one, and the narrative indeed shows signs of oral delivery, as in the occasionally confusing use of pronouns (p. 1). She has told the story over and over; now she must preserve it in writing. The oral and the written telling are again aspects of her impulse towards inclusivity and preservation. She mixes the oral and written modes: "What I have *mentioned* I have taken care shou'd be Truth," though "I *writ* it in a few

6 Since the word "Part" in reference to persons often had sexual overtones, Behn's identification of the "masculine Part in her" has interesting relevance to Thomas Laqueur's recent exposition in *Making Sex: The Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) of the "one-sex model" of sexual identity prevailing in medical discourse until the eighteenth century. In this Galenic model, a woman is a man turned outside in, the female genitalia being homologous with those of the male at every point (pp. 4, 149). Cf. Defoe's *Roxana*: "I wou'd be a *Man-Woman*," *Roxana*, ed. David Blewett (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 212. In an unpublished paper, "Gender, Authorship, and Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," Michelle Persell calls attention to Behn's ambivalence about exercising her "Female Pen": "it is only when Behn is no longer protected by a veil of narratorial objectivity, when she begins to take part in the events themselves, that the anxiety of authorship erupts into the text ... Behn's writing becomes a kind of phallic appropriation. She assumes the 'author-ity,' symbolized by the phallus, that is reserved for men alone in the Restoration. Behn clearly subverts patriarchal ideology in the very act of defying conventions of gendered behaviour by autonomously creating art. ... But she also engages in an exceptionally provoking role-reversal, whereby the authoress constructs a man's 'Fame' through her art in contrast to the traditional objectification of women into an aesthetic ideal by the male artist" (p. 5). Also relevant to this discussion are the male poets who attribute the divine androgynous power of the male/female *imago dei* found in the hermeticist tradition to Behn's poems in their laudatory verses on the publication of her poetry: "With all the *thought* and *vigour* of our Sex / The moving *softness* of your own you mix. / The *Queen* of Beauty and the *God* of Wars / Imbracing lie in thy due temper'd Verse, / *Venus* her sweetness and the force of *Mars*. / Thus thy luxuriant Muse her pleasure takes, / As *God* of old in *Eden's* blissful walks; / The Beauties of her new Creation view'd, / Full of content She sees that it is *good*" (*Poems of A. Behn*, Summers ed. of the *The Works*, 6:117-18). It is almost as if the male poets can accept Aphra Behn more easily as an androgyne than as a woman. Considering the enormous power of the androgynous *imago dei* in seventeenth-century hermetic thought, this identification could be construed as the ultimate male compliment to her, or it could be viewed more simply as another way of refusing to admit the unique power of feminine art and discourse.

Hours," never resting her "Pen a Moment for Thought: 'Tis purely the Merit of my Slave that must render it worthy of the Honour it begs" (my emphasis).

She signs her name "A. Behn" and the next words of the narrative proper are, "I do not pretend." Despite this deceptively modest opening, the author has moved now beyond the realm of the poet into the higher sphere of the pure "Historian" by "relating the Truth" in such a way that the Story "shall come simply into the World," like a natural birth, "recommended by its own proper Merits, and natural Intrigues." Like Truth, the proverbially elusive and beautiful woman who needs no adornment of any kind, the "History" of Oroonoko has its own Merit and Honour, as in Johnson's definition of "History": "a narration of events and facts delivered with dignity." The narrator subtly allies herself from the beginning with Nature, the pre-eminent and all-embracing feminine story teller, and at the same time moves beyond history into myth. *Oroonoko* is a myth in its purest form, *mythos* as word, and myth as the story of a god or godlike being. Mistress Behn, in the "Epistle Dedicatory" and elsewhere, stresses her identity as a teller and a writer, a verbal artist: when Oroonoko called her his "*Great Mistress*," he also said her "Word would go a great way with him." Behn's later writings show a consistent concern with her place in literary history, and she expects her "Word" to take Oroonoko and Imoinda to literary immortality.



By claiming to be an "Eye-witness to a great part of what you will find here set down," and by claiming that what she did not see she "receiv'd from the Mouth" of the godlike hero himself, Mistress Behn implicitly invites comparison with New Testament authorities. St Luke testifies to "those things which are most surely believed among us, Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word" (1:1-2), and St Peter disavows all artifice in his testimony: "For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16). The narrator and a small group of her family and friends were the privileged few—distinguished from the "Reader" unfamiliar with this strange new "other world"—"who were perfectly charm'd with the Character of this great Man, [and] were curious to gather every Circumstance of his Life" (p. 1). The stress on "we" and "us" is also in the manner and tone of Gospel tidings.

The narrator thus represents her former self as an important and influential young Englishwoman who happened at that time to be living in the "best House" in the country, called "St. John's Hill." Besides Luke and Peter, her opening recalls the words of John 19:35: "And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe." In terms that also recall Milton's description of Paradise, the house stood at the top of a vast rock of white marble, at the foot of which ran a river "a vast depth down" and the opposite bank was adorned with large quantities of different flowers eternally blowing (p. 49).<sup>7</sup> Oroonoko is frequently linked with flowers, and the author gives her African hero the name of the great river of Caribbean South America, the one which Robinson Crusoe will eventually find himself in the mouth of. She will testify at length to Oroonoko's superhuman but also finite powers as a vulnerable hero of waters and the earth, Nature's own heroic god.

It is, then, from this pre-eminent position of social and mythic power that Mistress Behn presents her eyewitness account of the Royal Slave and his consort, Imoinda, a marvelously intricate, robust, and self-contained work of language and a creation myth, written by a woman—male and female created she them ("Female to the noble Male" [p. 9])—working in intimate touch with Nature, about a new black Adam and Eve, new but at the same time as old as creation.

Like the island segment of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Oroonoko* is a peculiar kind of binary narrative, the second part (the American narrative which recounts Oroonoko and Imoinda's career in South America) recapitulating the first (the African narrative of Oroonoko and Imoinda, ending with Oroonoko's arrival in Surinam near the midpoint of the narrative [p. 37]). In both parts we have a luxuriant, highly visual and varicoloured evocation of the primeval world. The voice and presence of the narrator are implicated in the recreation of this other World, a scene of wonders, unheard-of birds and animals, strange customs, miracle cures. The opening description, after recounting the variety of Nature's productions in this new Eden, tells of the Indian aprons woven "very prettily in Flowers of several Colours" worn "as *Adam* and *Eve* did the Fig-leaves" (p. 2). The Indians' faces are "painted in little Specks or Flowers here and there." When the narrator meets Oroonoko and Imoinda in the second part, she records that Imoinda was "carved in fine Flowers and Birds all over her Body," and that Oroonoko was "carved with a little Flower, or Bird, at the sides of the Temples" (p. 45). In a sensuous

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Paradise Lost*, IV. 223-46.

passage in the first description she prefigures the relationship between Oroonoko and Imoinda by noting how the Indians are so used to seeing each other naked, "so like our first Parents before the Fall, it seems as if they had no Wishes," and like Milton's Adam and Eve they have no bodily secrets, no lewdness or disguise, "but all you can see, you see at once, and every moment see" (p. 3).<sup>8</sup> This immediate, inclusive style of edenic perception (contrasted with the painter's circumlinear sequence of viewpoints we noted in the Epistle Dedicatory) is re-echoed in the second part when Oroonoko recognizes Imoinda, who he thought was dead: "he soon saw *Imoinda* all over her; in a minute he saw her Face, her Shape, her Air, her Modesty" (p. 43). Such is the unmediated vision of true love for Aphra Behn, one that incorporates innocence, wholeness, integrity—and the "Face" is mentioned first.

The world of the Indians and the world of Coramantien (historically, Koromantyn), Oroonoko and Imoinda's native country on the African Gold Coast, share certain values. Both are warrior-cultures whose primary ethic of the inviolability of the spoken word (p. 34) places the preservation of personal honour over life itself. (This theme will take on major significance in the two woman-centred novels of Richardson, *Pamela* and *Clarissa*.) Oroonoko's personal virtues are those of the traditional noble warrior—Courage, Honour, Generosity—but he also demonstrates the feminine virtue of Softness (the first attribute of Milton's Eve) making him "capable of the highest Passions of Love and Gallantry" (p. 7). "Softness" for Milton and Behn in these contexts connotes not weakness but mildness, tenderness, considerateness. Imoinda radiates Beauty and Softness, embodying "the silent language of newborn Love," but she will also show herself a heroic warrior alongside Oroonoko in the slave revolt when she wounds the villainous Deputy Governor, Byam (pp. 64–65).

In terms of setting and shared values, there is an essential continuity between the African and the American pagan worlds in *Oroonoko*, set against the depiction of a Euro-Christian world which consistently distorts the principle of the inviolability of the spoken vow. The narrator

8 Cf. *Paradise Lost*, IV, 736–47. Cf. also Claude Lévi-Strauss on nakedness and the fundamental role of the male/female couple among the Nambikwara: "Peoples who live entirely naked are not ignorant of what we call 'modesty': they simply have another frontier line. Among the Brazilian Indians ... modesty has nothing to do with how much or how little of the body is exposed; tranquillity lies on one side of the frontier, agitation on the other." *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Russell (New York: Atheneum, 1972), pp. 277–78. I have discussed the binary structure of the "island narrative" of *Robinson Crusoe* in "Starting Over with *Robinson Crusoe*" in *Daniel Defoe: The Making of His Prose Fiction*, ed. Malinda Snow, *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 15 (1982), 51–73.

goes so far, indeed, in the early description, as to declare that "these People represented to me an absolute *Idea* of the first State of Innocence, before *Man* knew how to sin: And 'tis most evident and plain, that simple Nature is the most harmless, inoffensive and vertuous Mistress. 'Tis she alone, if she were permitted, that better instructs the World, than all the Inventions of Man" (p. 3). In her own way, the role of instructress is the one which Behn as Mistress Nature's handmaid aspires to; she is the author and narrator of a unique "novel," an implicit gospel of the religion of innocent Nature, with Oroonoko and Imoinda as her godlike heroes. But this role is fraught with tension and contradictions because, while allying herself with the primal creative power of a virtuous female Nature, Aphra Behn also represents poignantly and acutely her subordinate status as a seventeenth-century woman, despite her "masculine Part" and her brief moment of power in the government of Surinam.<sup>9</sup>



When Oroonoko finds himself betrayed by the English captain and sold as a slave, his new owner, the plantation manager Trefry, gives him the slave name of "Caesar." As in Scripture, a new name means a new destiny. The masculine power structure gives him a new identity and fate in this dangerous and "obscure World" of Surinam where the Dutch will soon dispose of all the males who could have told his story (reminiscent of the biblical male annihilation motif of Exodus 1), and he is "afforded only a Female Pen to celebrate his Fame," as if Aphra Behn—like the messenger in Job—had alone escaped to tell it. Oroonoko, Imoinda, and the narrator are all represented in the narrative as the last of their kind.

Aphra Behn's ambivalence about her role as a woman and a writer carries over to her account of her involvement in the critical period before Oroonoko masterminds the slave revolt which leads to his downfall. The narrator now enters the action as a key character. I will call her Aphra to distinguish her from Mistress Behn, the narrator. The narrator describes how, at the critical moment when Caesar is bargaining for his release, she herself is called in by the English powers-that-be to negotiate with him, as a kind of mediator, to buy time and prevent a

<sup>9</sup> Especially relevant to Behn's *œuvre* is the re-evaluation of "Nature" as a highly complex seventeenth-century feminine construct in the recent work of Carolyn Merchant, Brian Easlea, Evelyn Fox Keller, Londa Schiebinger, and others. See also Robert A. Erickson, *Mother Midnight: Birth, Sex, and Fate in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: AMS Press, 1986), pp. xii, 14, 18, 211-16.

mutiny. The author of *Oroonoko* devises a remarkable contrast between the twenty-four-year-old *oral* storyteller Aphra and the forty-eight-year-old Mistress Behn, the *writer*, as narrators. Aphra, working as an agent of the English colonialists, becomes the official entertainer of Oroonoko and Imoinda at her home and the three are together virtually every hour of the day (p. 46). As the daughter of the "Lieutenant-General" who died at sea and as the chief resident of St John's Hill, Aphra has easy access to the young lovers, Caesar and Clémène (Imoinda's slave name); she forms a friendship with Caesar and feels she has the authority to assure him of his liberty as soon as the absent "Lord-Governour" will arrive. Aphra is characterized as a gifted teller of literary tales. She narrates the love stories of the "*Romans*," Romanizing (and romanticizing) the newly named Caesar even further, which "charmed him to my Company" (p. 46). At the same time, she teaches Imoinda all the "pretty Works" of literature of which she is "Mistress," trying to Christianize her. Caesar balks at this (he has difficulty with the concept of the Trinity) but he acquiesces in this learning environment, preferring the company of the women, presumably including Aphra's mother, sister, and female servant, above that of men. It is as if Aphra is trying to bring Oroonoko and Imoinda within the "compass" (p. 48) of her feminine spell-binding powers, and thus further within the control of the English governors.

At this point Oroonoko praises Aphra as his "*Great Mistress*," a kind of *magna mater*, protector, nourisher, instructor, and one who will (unknown to him) become—as the older narrator, Mistress Behn—his biographer and virtual apostle. Mistress Behn, now finally writing down the narrative she has told and retold to such universal admiration, conveys the sense that her relationship with these two beautiful creatures, both inscribed on their bodies with indecipherable hieroglyphs in the form of flowers and birds, was far more important than she recognized at the time. She is now, at the time of writing, in a position somewhat analogous to that of Onahal, the "decayed Beauty" who instructed the young concubines in the old king's "otan" in "all those wanton Arts of Love" (p. 18). Onahal, an early representative of what I have called the "Mother Midnight" figure (a kind of bawd, matchmaker, and agent of fate combined), played a crucial part in originally bringing the young lovers together. The decayed beauty Mistress Behn now writes the narrative of how as a younger woman she helped to determine the outcome of their lives. At this moment Aphra Behn as character and narrator incorporates many of the positive roles of "Mistress," and here as a character in her own fiction she becomes Oroonoko-Imoinda's living fate. At the same time she

is, in her own view, only a woman, and Caesar-Clémène are only slaves. The three are bonded in subservient roles; much of the enduring power of this text lies in its confederacy of the paradoxical pair—woman author and royal slave—attempting to overcome their bondage.

But Aphra, though in a position of apparent power, is further characterized by her narrator as a cautious and timorous woman: she does not trust Caesar. Before they part, she gets his promise to wait patiently a little longer for the arrival of the Lord Governor. Her next sentence, "After this, I neither thought it convenient to trust him much out of our view," reinforces her caution, and later, when the news of his revolt is brought to her, "we [women] were possess'd with extreme Fear ... that he would secure himself till night, and then, that he would come down and cut all our Throats" (p. 68). Thus the narrator's anxieties about her female Pen are augmented with notions of female terror.



The sacrifice of Imoinda "to [his] Revenge" is one of the most remarkable episodes in the history of the Royal Slave. It is prefigured by Caesar's killing of the great She-Tiger in the Indian rain forests. The narrator says, "when the Heart of this courageous Animal was taken out, there were seven Bullets of Lead in it, the Wound seam'd up with great Scars, and she liv'd with the Bullets a great while. ... This Heart the Conqueror brought up to us, and 'twas a very great Curiosity, which all the Country came to see" (pp. 52–53). Here a woman tells a new "truth" to men about the vital power at the heart of female Nature. Caesar anatomizes the tiger and removes and displays her heart. By doing so he unwittingly reveals his own fate in the heart of an animal that exemplifies his own superhuman life force. But this force is subject to his own will and the barbarous cruelty of others. When Oroonoko married Imoinda in Coramantien he vowed, contrary to the practice of polygamy in his country, that "she shou'd be the only Woman he wou'd possess while he liv'd; that no Age or Wrinkles shou'd encline him to change; for her Soul wou'd be always fine, and always young; and he shou'd have an eternal *Idea* in his Mind of the Charms she now bore; and shou'd look into his Heart for that *Idea*, when he cou'd find it no longer in her Face" (p. 11). The word "Idea" here recalls the narrator's "*Idea* of the first State of Innocence" (p. 3). We may presume that the idea of Imoinda's face resides in the heart of Caesar as she lays herself down before him "while he, with a hand resolved, and a heart-breaking within, gave the fatal Stroke, first

cutting her Throat, and then severing her yet smiling Face from that delicate Body, pregnant as it was with the Fruits of tenderest Love" (p. 72). As Caesar severs the "smiling Face"—Mistress Behn prefers not to use the word "Head"—from the delicate body of Imoinda, it is as if he severs his own heart as well. Earlier in the novel the old king of Coramantien had a "Bed of State made ready, with Sweets and Flowers" for his dalliance with the "trembling Victim," Imoinda (p. 17). Now Caesar lays the body of the "ador'd Victim ... on Leaves and Flowers, of which he made a Bed, and conceal'd it under the same Cover-lid of Nature; only her Face he left yet bare to look on" (p. 72). The fatal swiftness of the act recalls how "he ravish'd in a moment" her willing charms in his grandfather's otan (p. 23). The older narrator's presence again hovers intimately, precariously, over this scene of delicate carnage. We recall that it was Aphra herself who had once feared that Oroonoko might cut all the women's throats (p. 68).

In this sacrifice, Oroonoko preserves his native honour and that of his wife and unborn child, and reaffirms the vow he made after his first near-execution by the English: "Oroonoko *scorns to live with the Indignity that was put on Caesar*. All we could do, could get no more Words from him" (p. 69). With this solemn pronouncement, he renounces the slave name and reclaims his original African-American self epitomized in the name given him by the narrator.<sup>10</sup> Finally, as the narrator participated intimately in his original ravishing of Imoinda and his sacrifice

10 A number of recent commentators on *Oroonoko* have offered ingenious political/allegorical readings of the protagonist, associating him with Stuart monarchs from Charles I to, in particular, James II. George Guffey, in "Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*: Occasion and Accomplishment" (in Guffey and Andrew Wright, *Two English Novelists: Aphra Behn and Anthony Trollope* [Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1975]), notes that Behn refers to James as "Great Cesar" in her "Congratulatory Poem to Her Sacred Majesty Queen Mary, Upon Her Arrival in England" (London, 1689) and that "Oroonoko, or Caesar, like Charles I ... meets his executioner with grace and dignity ... Mrs. Behn, fearing that history might repeat itself in England, must have intended us to associate the unjust treatment of Caesar with the imperilled situation of James II during that summer of 1688" (pp. 35–36). Maureen Duffy states unequivocally that "emotionally Orinooko, Imoinda and their unborn child are James, Mary [of Modena] and the unborn, while [Behn] was writing it, prince, Trefry, [Colonel George] Marten, and her family are the loyalists; Byam and Banister and their rabble are the opposition" (*The Passionate Shepherdess*, p. 267). Most recently, Laura Brown in "The Romance of Empire: *Oroonoko* and the Trade in Slaves" (in *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, and English Literature*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown [New York: Methuen, 1987]), the best analysis of the work in the context of early British imperialism, has reminded us that Behn's slave name for Oroonoko—Caesar—is the one she repeatedly used for the Stuart monarchs Charles II and James II, and Brown makes an intriguing, if rather obscurely articulated, case that *Oroonoko's* heroism and tragic fate echoes that of Charles Stuart: "The sense of momentous loss generated on behalf of the 'royal slave' is the product of the hidden figuration in *Oroonoko's* death of the culminating moment of the English revolution" (p. 58). I have no doubt that *Oroonoko* in some sense is designed to recall the virtues of the Stuart monarchs, but though the foregoing conjectures are often informative, they are not particularly convincing in their specific

of her, so she participates in the culmination of her hero's descent into darkness, suggested in the literal blackness of "Melancholy," a word that appears often in the final pages of the novella. After his second partial resurrection, she speaks with him: "His 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)" (p. 76). The aging author (anticipated by her sickly narrator) and her slave go back to the earth together.

At the end, Oroonoko, like the Indian warriors he esteemed, who showed their royal courage by persevering in dismemberment contests, demonstrates a similar "passive Valour" (p. 58). And the end, like the beginning, has overtones of the Gospel narratives. Before the wild Irishman, Banister, is allowed to exercise his "absolute Barbarity" in chopping off, in sequence, Oroonoko's genitals, ears, nose, and arms, the hero, smiling, blesses his executioners, and the narrator remarks, "My Mother and Sister were by him all the while, but not suffer'd to save him" as "his Head sunk ... and he gave up the Ghost without a Groan" (p. 77). Luke's gospel records Jesus' forgiveness of his executioners, and John testifies that "there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister ... and Mary Magdalene" (19:25), who is an eyewitness to the post-resurrection Jesus. Behn's hero and Jesus die within the grieving maternal presence of women. Jesus' last words in John are "It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost" (19:30). Mrs Behn's non-Christian martyr smokes a pipe during the execution. His last heroic life act is more a symbol of pagan stoic resignation and possibly of friendship and peace than a sign of his Europeanization.

As Oroonoko reclaimed his original African name before his final ordeal, so Mistress Behn, now both affirming herself in her present role as author and complimenting the sagacity of her noble dedicatee, rises above ambivalence about her female Pen by enclosing her "masculine Part" subliminally within her inscription to assert the hope that "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*" (p. 78). "My pen is considerable." This reverses her claim in the Epistle Dedicatory that the merit of Oroonoko alone will render the narrative worthy of honour, and stresses the equal claim to glory of the heroine. Oroonoko and Imoinda are united in the end as an heroic unit. The first

details, and none of them notes Oroonoko's renunciation of the name Caesar, imposed upon him by the white European colonists.

and final words of the narrative refer to a woman, enclosing *Oroonoko* in a feminine embrace, Nature's child laid to rest. One thinks of all the narratives in Western literature through the seventeenth century in which the woman martyr has suffered physical violation. Mistress Behn rewrites this tradition by making Oroonoko-Imoinda her creation, her black Adam and Eve, her king-queen, hero-heroine (yet slaves), and she tenderly but implacably—like an inscrutable female Fate—writes them to death, dismembers them with her female pen, in order to affirm an alternate gospel of stoic martyrdom in the pan-cultural ("Original," "Innocent") heroic pair, the united male and female hero of "all Mankind."



We know that Aphra Behn wrote *Oroonoko* during a period of grave illness, great personal anxiety, and out of a compelling personal desire to make her hero and heroine live in a *written* narrative text. In all the current discussions of "desire" in fiction, no one (to my knowledge) has emphasized the importance of the philosophical definition of desire articulated by John Locke only two years after the publication of *Oroonoko*. For Locke, the primary motive for any change in the human situation is discontent, dis-ease, discomfort—what he calls "uneasiness." Will and desire are not the same thing. Will or power of volition is conversant only about our own actions, whereas *desire is the very state of uneasiness itself*. "All pain of the body, of what sort soever, and disquiet of mind, is uneasiness," and until some form of relief or "ease" is attained, we remain in a state of desire or anxiety. As an extreme example of this desire (framed by allusions to Proverbs 13 and St Paul on marriage), Locke cites the great cry of the barren Rachel to Jacob, "Give me children or I die!" (Gen. 30:1).<sup>11</sup> Locke links the cry of a woman with the fundamental meaning of desire, and fastens on a key element of Restoration anxiety, from the prevailing undercurrent of "unease" articulated in the resurgence of dramatic comedy to the growing uneasiness of Milton's heroic pair in *Paradise Lost*. And Locke's discourse on desire, ultimately an assertion of the underlying irrational ground of human motivation as he understood it, has profound relevance to the emergence of the fiction of Aphra Behn, especially the writing of *Oroonoko*. Created out of an overwhelming moment of feminine desire as dis-ease,

<sup>11</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser [1894] (New York: Dover, 1959), 1:330–36.

the novella itself conveys an indelible sense of anxiety in the fate of its heroes, both the explicit and the implicit ones.

Out of this philosophical sense of articulated "desire," and from her precarious position as a woman who has gained some considerable "Reputation" as well as notoriety for her pen, Mistress Behn can dedicate her novel about the Great Man Oroonoko to another Great Man, Richard Maitland. Theoretical concerns with epistolarity in fiction might pay more attention to epistles dedicatory. A dedication (from "dedicare") is originally a consecration, a setting apart for worship or devoting to a sacred purpose. For Mistress Behn at this point in her life an epistle dedicatory, particularly for this fiction, is a kind of last literary will and testament, and an expiation.

In a last ambivalent gesture, Mistress Behn will put the story of the godlike Oroonoko-Imoinda into the protection of the one English aristocrat *and his lady* she most reveres, and who, in the threatening political atmosphere of 1688, must have seemed to Behn and to some of her readers the doomed European-Christian counterparts to her hero-heroine.<sup>12</sup> She may well have been thinking too of James II and his queen with their unborn baby when she wrote of the doomed love between Oroonoko and the pregnant Imoinda, but we are on safer ground I think to see her dedication of the work to Lord and Lady Maitland as more literary and religious than political. She knows of Maitland's literary talents and aspirations—he was to become the translator, whom Dryden would commend, of another heroic work, Virgil's *Aeneid*. She praises him for Youth, Gaiety, Wit, fine Sense, Faith, Morality, Wisdom, Generosity, and Greatness of Mind, all qualities exemplified in her hero. The metaphor of flowers is carried over from Oroonoko as Maitland is compared to the industrious bee returning from every flower with precious dew for the public good. The combination of his quality and the veneration paid

12 Maitland, a Tory and a strong Jacobite, refused to accept the Revolution settlement and became an exile with his king. His wife, Lady Agnes Campbell (1658-1734), was known for her Protestant sympathies. She was the second daughter of Archibald Campbell, ninth earl of Argyll (1629-85), who had been sentenced to death on a dubious charge of treason in 1681. He escaped to Holland and joined Monmouth's conspiracy only to lead an abortive invasion of Scotland, where, following in the steps in 1661 of his more famous father, he was beheaded in Edinburgh. The doom of the Campbells was not for Aphra Behn a distant analogue to the apparent disaster overtaking the House of Stuart. The violence of brutal execution—from the judicial murder of at least thirty-five Roman Catholics in the Popish Plot of 1678 to the aftermath of the Rye House Plot and the reign of Judge Jeffreys in the "Bloody Assizes" after Monmouth's defeat in 1685, when over one hundred people were executed—was in the air she breathed. William C. Spengemann refers to Maitland as "A GHOST OF THE OLD STRET THAT RISES WITH OROONOKO" in "THE EARLIEST AMERICAN NOVEL: APHRA BEHN'S *Oroonoko*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 38 (1984): 405.

to him by the people creates, like a primeval Oroonokan river, "flowing Plenty" in the barren soil of Scotland. Heaven has blessed him with a Lady who is his feminine equal in Youth, Sweetness of Nature, illustrious Family, Grace, Beauty, Virtue, and Piety. Echoing the "Tranquillity" of her idealized Indians in South America, Behn speculates that "your tranquil Lives are an Image of the new Made and Beautiful Pair in Paradise," recalling as well Oroonoko and Imoinda as the new Adam and Eve.

The original Oroonoko was a man gallant enough to have merited Maitland's protection, and if he had been so fortunate, he might not have made so inglorious an end. "Though I had none above me in that Country yet I wanted power to preserve this Great Man" (Epistle Dedicatory). Almost like an idealized literary executor, Maitland will protect the Oroonoko whom the young Aphra, working for her English masters, was not able to keep alive. There is a lingering sense of guilt adumbrated here and in the work itself for her role in Oroonoko's demise. In a sense, the whole narrative is an epistle dedicatory of Oroonoko to Lord Maitland and to posterity, the one way Mrs Aphra Behn, the mistress and master of the art of dramatic narrative, has left to "preserve" both of these Great Men, and her own ambiguous sense of what is "great" about them.

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