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The Other Problem with Women: Reproduction and Slave Culture in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*†

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* * * Almost any discussion of slavery will eventually call into question the nature of family ties. What finally separates slavery from other kinds of servitude is that while a free person is born into a complex network of social ties and responsibilities, a slave is born into a single legal relationship—that of a servant to his master—over which he has no volition. The ordinary bonds that a slave might enter into, such as marriage or parenthood, have no force in the eyes of his master. The sociologist Orlando Patterson calls this characteristic of slavery "natal alienation."[1] * * * This peculiar horror of slavery is clearly illustrated in *Oroonoko*: The conflict between freedom and slavery is played out along the lines of family ties. Oroonoko reacts against slavery by fighting to reestablish his claim on his own child—to reinvolve that child in a heritage, in a history. It is, then, a measure of the brutality of the relation of slavery that the only way he can make the connection between parent and child evident is through murder.

* * * Precisely because the slave trade was a trade in living human beings, the balance between births and deaths translated directly into economic profit and loss. In the Caribbean colonies, this relationship between people and profit was complicated by the fact that the population of slaves continually decreased despite constant importation of new African captives. This decrease was caused in part by a decision on the part of West Indian plantation owners that importing new slaves was cheaper and more efficient than inducing slaves to raise families. But even when masters tried to cultivate self-reproducing populations, they failed.[2] * * *

Plantation culture depended on the female capacity to reproduce,

† Revised and abridged from *Rereading Aphra Behn: History, Theory, and Criticism*, ed. Heidi Hutner (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 212–33. Reprinted with permission of the University Press of Virginia.
I am grateful to Laura Brown for her help with earlier versions of this piece [Author's note].

1. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), p. 7. The phrase "goes directly to the heart of what is critical in the slave's forced alienation, the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations. It also has the important nuance of a loss of native status, of deracination. It was this alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforcable ties of 'blood,' and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master, that gave the relation of slavery its peculiar value to the master."
2. Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development, and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: MacGibbon and Kee, 1967), p. 109.

but female slaves were themselves workers, brutalized by a cruel economic system. * * * The controversy over whether black women willfully refused to reproduce or whether the slave system itself undermined their actual capacity to reproduce continues among historians today, and I will not resolve it here.[3] I will point out, however, that these problems eventually became a central battleground in the English imperial struggle to maintain a slave culture. Although this crisis did not become acute until the beginning of the nineteenth century, its importance is intimated in Behn's novel by the anxieties provoked by Imoinda's pregnancy. In the struggle over her unborn child, the historical specificity of Caribbean slavery surfaces, if briefly, in a text that otherwise almost completely elides the material facts of that institution. Imoinda's unborn child, made to motivate so much of the later action of *Oroonoko*, also bears with it all the problems of cultural as well as biological reproduction. If the child were to be born in the novel, that birth would signify both the continued captivity of Oroonoko's race and the continued viability of slave culture in Surinam. Its death, in contrast, indicates Oroonoko's continued, princely, control over his race.

Thus, although the problem of reproduction occupies a very small space in *Oroonoko*, it provides a crucial point of intersection between the historical context of the slave trade and an ahistorical heroic romance. Moreover, I choose to focus on this issue because it is a moment when a possible resistance to slavery is glimpsed within a text otherwise quite concerned with maintaining the status quo. The point of coincidence, which is also a window onto the possibilities for resistance, is the body of a woman.[4] * * *

I

Imoinda is a possession even before she is a slave. She, and any children she might have, are inextricably bound by the property definitions of their native culture. Imoinda's exile in Surinam, therefore, is not so much a transition from freedom to slavery as a transition from one code of property relations to another. Of course, the way she is "owned" by Trefry is very different than the way she is "owned" by the king of Coramatien, but in both cases Imoinda remains rigidly confined

3. Cf. Barbara Bush, "'The Family Tree is not Cut': Women and Cultural Resistance in the British Caribbean," in *In Resistance: Studies in African, Caribbean, and Afro-American History*, ed. Gary Okihiro (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1986); Marietta Morrissey, *Slave Women in the New World: Gender Stratification in the Caribbean* (Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas Press, 1989).
4. At this point my argument closely resembles Laura Brown's discussion of the novel, in which she claims that "the figure of the woman in the imperialist narrative . . . provides the point of contact through which the violence of colonial history . . . can be represented," in "The Romance of the Empire: *Oroonoko* and the Trade in Slaves," in *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory *Politics* English Literature*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York: Methuen Press, 1987), p. 43.

by codes of possession. The novel, however, represents Imoinda as holding a highly unstable position within both of those codes, an unstable position that constantly threatens to disrupt any social system. On the Gold Coast of West Africa, her marriageable body produces an important political crisis as well as a familial crisis. In Surinam, her body as a reproductive vessel again provokes a violent confrontation, this time between Oroonoko's sense of honor and slave culture itself. On both continents the crisis is solved in the same way; not by any change in existing conditions but through the elimination of the offending piece of property—Imoinda's body.

In Africa, the king is troubled by "having been forc'd, by an irresistible Passion, to rob his son [grandson] of a Treasure." * * * In this series of events, the conditions for Imoinda's value as property are laid bare; she must be possessed absolutely to be worth being possessed at all. Because of this system of value, Imoinda's chastity becomes an index of the king's authority; his power as a ruler depends on his ability to own the best things and to keep them for his own exclusive use. * * *

When Oroonoko "possesses" her sexually he violates his culture's property laws along with familial sexual prohibitions. The legitimacy of these codes can only be restored by the removal of the property in question. * * *

When Imoinda reappears in Surinam the crisis in property relations also reappears. This time, her progeny rather than her virginity becomes the property in question. Similarly, however, the desirability of this property threatens to upset the existing power structure. When she becomes pregnant "this new Accident made [Oroonoko] more Impatient of Liberty . . . and [he] offer'd either Gold, or a vast quantity of Slaves, which shou'd be paid before they let him go." * * *

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* * * And her pregnancy inspires his first plans for escape because "all the Breed is theirs to whom the Parents belong." In Patterson's terms, Oroonoko rebels against the possibility that his child will be born into a natally alienated state. To Oroonoko's thinking, the child should be the next "of his Great Race," born into the kinship network that makes Oroonoko a powerful prince. For the child to achieve such a status, however, the ties between parent and child as well as between husband and wife must be acknowledged. Only through the recognition of genealogical descent can the child receive its cultural inheritance. * * *

The resolution to this crisis in property relations is brought about by extraordinary violence. The physical destruction of bodies is, at last, the only way to ascertain their true owners. Oroonoko decides that if he cannot escape he can at least revenge himself on his English captors. A crucial part of this plan to salvage his honor, however, involves Imoinda's death. He resolves to kill her himself rather than leave her to be "a Prey, or at best a Slave" to "nasty Lusts." Thus, he enforces his property claim to Imoinda's body—in both its sexual and its reproductive capacities—by murdering her. He kills this "Treasure of his Soul" by "first, cutting her Throat, and then severing her yet Smiling Face from that Delicate Body, pregnant as it was with the Fruits of tend'rest Love." Although the language here partakes of the nascent conventions of sentimentality, the very cuts between the pieces of her body become the inscription of his proprietorship.

Surinam - Is chastity NW - Is progeny

* * *

Imoinda's murder, however, in no way changes the conditions of Oroonoko's captivity. The scene, instead, drains Oroonoko of the energy to carry out an actual rebellion. The violence of an uprising is thus absorbed into familial violence. The mayhem of this love scene only works to restore Oroonoko's personal honor, or glory. Furthermore, Oroonoko's liberation from the demeaning conditions of slavery is carried out not against the slave owners but on the body of a woman. Imoinda's dismembered body becomes, strangely enough, the sign of Oroonoko's nobility—of the spiritual liberty that must take the place, for him, of physical liberty.

This effect is most clear in the scene directly following Imoinda's death. When the plantation owners come to recapture Oroonoko, he is far too weak to hurt them; all he can do is hurt himself. The marks Oroonoko makes on his own body, however, mirror the injuries he has recently inflicted on Imoinda. First he cuts a piece of flesh from his own neck, just as he slit Imoinda's throat. Then, in an action that points to the underlying significance of Imoinda's murder, Oroonoko, rather than cutting off his own head, "rip'd up his own Belly; and took his Bowels and pull'd 'em out, with what Strength he cou'd." With this action he recalls that he has just effectively aborted Imoinda's child. Oroonoko is willing to do all this to avoid "the shameful Whip." Thus, the sign of Oroonoko's courage to choose a noble death over the shame of slavery is also a repetition of the sign of his absolute possession of wife and child. The code of nobility that Oroonoko writes on his own body signifies his power over a woman, not his emancipation from slavery.

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* * * Imoinda's death paves the way for an ending that allows Oroonoko his glory without seriously challenging the existence of a slave culture. Her mutilation becomes a perfect substitute for violence against the slave owners. Woman's powerlessness seems to be culturally portable. She is a continual threat to the stability of power relations but also, because of her powerlessness, she serves as the ever-reliable instrument of their stabilization.

II

At the same time that the novel imagines Imoinda as a conveniently disposable possession, it also imagines her as an enormously powerful erotic figure. This figuration is achieved by assigning her the conventional features of a romantic heroine. Thus, Imoinda emerges as a character through the established codes of the heroic romance. Larger and more perfect than life, she is characterized not as an African woman of the seventeenth century but rather as the type of the heroine of heroic romance. She is "Female to the noble Male; the beautiful *Black Venus* to our young *Mars*"—an embodiment of a very western ideal. Within the codes of romantic love, however, Imoinda is a very potent figure, in direct contrast to the role she occupies in actual power relations. While still in Africa she carries out "a perfect Conquest over [Oroonoko's] fierce Heart, and made him feel, the Victor cou'd be subdu'd." * * *

* * * In Surinam, "all the Slaves [were] perpetually at her Feet," and the narrator claims to "have seen an hundred *White* Men sighing after her, and making a thousand Vows at her feet, all vain, and unsuccessful." * * *

In terms of this set of conventions, Imoinda directs others' actions instead of being directed by others. She even has the capacity to render Oroonoko powerless by replacing his will with her image. In Africa "his Eyes fix'd on the Object of his Soul; and as she turn'd or mov'd, so did they: and she alone gave his Eyes and Soul their Motions." Imoinda's visual presence has the power to erase any other thought from his mind—his mental capacity does indeed shrink to the space of her body. This power appears inalienable in that the same scene takes place when the lovers meet in Surinam: "In a Minute he saw her Face, her Shape, her Air, her Modesty, and all that call'd forth his Soul with Joy at his Eyes, and left his Body destitute of almost Life: it stood without Motion, and, for a Minute, knew not that it had a Being." Insofar as she exists as an image of beauty, Imoinda's power is extraordinary. The power of love, here a purely erotic affect produced by the visual effect of her presence, is absolute. No other definition of self, no other possibility of action, can exist beside it.

Insofar as the novel describes Imoinda as a romantic heroine, she moves through *Oroonoko* in a kind of alternate universe, a world that runs parallel to the world of slavery and transcends it. Imoinda and Oroonoko "mutually protested, that even Fetters and Slavery were Soft and Easy, and wou'd be supported with Joy and Pleasure, while they cou'd be so happy to possess each other, and to be able to make good their Vows. [Oroonoko] swore he disdain'd the Empire of the World, while he cou'd behold his *Imoinda*." When Oroonoko discovers Imoinda again in Surinam, his physical captivity is elided as its characteristics are recoded in terms of the satisfaction of eros; he is able to replace each term of slavery with what seems to be the complementary term of love. His possession by Trefry is rendered "Soft and Easy" by his possession by Imoinda and his possession of her. The contracts and terms of slavery fade into unimportance beside the lovers' "Vows." The possibility of an "Empire" that could encompass the whole world pales next to the much smaller domain of Imoinda's body. The world of romantic love thus contains all the elements of the world of slavery but reorganizes those elements into "Joy and Pleasure." Imoinda's presence neutralizes, at least momentarily, the pains of slavery. Moreover, her love provides alternate definitions of the crucial terms of "possession" and "empire." As Laura Brown has pointed out, the emphasis on tragic love within *Oroonoko* works to cancel out any connection Oroonoko has to the actual trade in slaves.[5]

Yet, although the conventions of heroic romance allow Imoinda no feature that marks her as distinctly African, the context of slavery makes the erotic power of women seem coercive and constraining. For the alternate world that romantic love creates threatens to block any action in the real world of Surinam: Oroonoko "accus'd himself for having suffer'd Slavery so long: yet he charg'd that weakness on Love alone, who was capable of making him neglect even Glory it self, and, for which, now he reproaches himself every moment of the Day." Despite Oroonoko's protestations of contentment in love, here the category of love becomes the ally of slavery. * * * Imoinda's extraordinary erotic allure is in the service of the coercive violence of slavery. The specific motion she stops with her presence is the action of rebellion.

This configuration—women and love aligned with slavers against men and glory—is acted out in *Oroonoko*. When Oroonoko tries to convince the slaves to rebel, one protests: "Were we only Men, [we] wou'd follow so great a Leader through the World: But oh! consider, we are Husbands and Parents too." Oroonoko assures the other slaves that the women will be able to join the escape, but the fears prove true: "The Women . . . being of fearful Cowardly Dispositions . . . crying out *Yield, yield; and leave Caesar to their Revenge* . . . by degrees the Slaves abandon'd *Caesar*." Imoinda, of course, does not act out the part she takes in Oroonoko's imagination, but remains with him until the end. Still, in this group of images, Oroonoko's romantic love for Imoinda is distinguished from his desire to establish and protect family ties. Although his desire to cement his property ties to her and his child

5. ["In Behn's text . . . "reductive normalizing" . . . is carried out through literary convention, and specifically through that very convention most effectively able to fix and codify the experience of radical alterity, the arbitrary codes of love and honor found in heroic romance": Laura Brown, "The Romance of Empire: *Oroonoko* and the Trade in Slaves," in *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 39.]

motivates his original rebellion, in this instance the sentimental attachments between husbands, wives, and children work to keep the slaves in captivity. Romantic love is shown to be dangerous in a slave culture, an enemy to glory and to self-respect. Furthermore, women are the sole agents of this dangerous emotion, inflicting it on men. Imoinda's beauty is a double-edged sword: It makes slavery bearable, but it also prevents any action against slavery.

This second problem posed by women—the disturbing power of their erotic presence—is ultimately managed in the same way as the first problem, the way in which women's bodies threaten property relations. In short, Imoinda dies. She accepts her death quite willingly; "Smiling with Joy," she becomes the "Ador'd Victim." Love effectively channels erotic power into submission. Still, by killing her, Oroonoko acts out his only revenge against slavery. Not only does he prove his power by taking her body out of the grasp of the slave owners, but he also proves his power against her body, insofar as that body has become a surrogate for the coercive power of slavery. The seemingly supererogatory brutality of this love scene is thus explained by the further overdetermination of Imoinda's body. That is, because the text figures Imoinda's sexual allure as complicit with slave culture, it is able to deflect political rebellion against slavery (what Oroonoko sets out to achieve) onto the defeat, or submission, of eros (what Oroonoko ends up achieving).

Cynthia Matlack claims that Imoinda's death scene in Thomas Southerne's dramatic adaptation of *Oroonoko* is only one of a number of similar scenes in heroic dramas of the period. In all the plays in which these scenes of willing sacrifice appear, "the political danger of women's erotic appeal can be seen in the extremely high incidence of metaphors describing the enslavement of the males by love."[6] The context of Behn's novel gives this conventional figure an added force: Imoinda's erotic appeal is figured by the novel to be the only slave-master against which Oroonoko can successfully rebel. Again, women's powerlessness becomes the convenient solution to the problem of slavery. Oroonoko does not have the power to challenge the larger social structures of slavery, but he does have the power to turn an adored "conqueror" into an "Ador'd Victim." Sexual mastery over women is constructed as the perfect double to economic control over slaves.

III

At first glance, the only thing that these images of Imoinda—as a particularly valuable piece of property and as a heart-stopping beauty—have in common is their solution. * * * But the two images are also

6. Cynthia S. Matlack, "Spectatress of the Mischief Which She Made: Tragic Women Perceived and Perceiver," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 6 (1977): 319.

involved on another level. Eros is used to mask the possibility of resistance that arises with Imoinda's pregnancy. * * *

Matlack notes the conjunction of politics, eros, and generation in her study of "erotic scenes in which the doomed women embrace their imminent death by willingly presenting their bosoms to the phallic dagger of authority." She claims that "at an elemental level of human semiotic exchange, this act of submission produces a transformation as the breasts which nourish progeny become the sign of domesticated eroticism."[7] We have already seen that erotic authority doubles for political authority in *Oroonoko* and that Oroonoko's power over Imoinda is a substitute for any power he might gain over the plantation owners. But Matlack's observation suggests that a double displacement might occur in the text. Although Imoinda does not present her breasts to be penetrated in the novel as she does in the play, we have already seen the importance of those parts of her body that "nourish progeny" in her mutilation. If Matlack is right, her body is eroticized both to absorb the political tension of the novel and to elide the fact that her body could be a reproductive vessel.

Why would it be important to deflect attention from the generative capabilities of a woman's body? At the beginning of this essay I alluded to the crucial place of reproduction in the slave economy of the Caribbean. Because of the need to reproduce labor through inherited status, a woman's womb played a central role in the economic organization of the slave colonies. And, in at least one instance, that womb became the site of resistance. Orlando Patterson, in the *Sociology of Slavery*, discusses the case of eighteenth-century Jamaica (an English sugar colony like Surinam), where "slave women absolutely refused to reproduce . . . as a form of gynecological revolt against the system."[8] * * *

* * * The possibility that captive women might take their biology into their own hands, either through abortion or the more extreme violence of murder, must have lurked in the imaginations of their white owners. For in this scenario, even the reproductive capacity of the womb—long thought to be the part of woman held in the strictest captivity by patriarchy—falls under suspicion for resistance. Even if the specter of infanticide is an imperialist fantasm, the mechanism through which the colonial mind projected responsibility for the brutality of slavery onto the very bodies it oppressed, the image becomes a sign of the colonist's fear of the consequences of slave culture. * * *

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We cannot be sure to what extent such historical material is relevant to *Oroonoko*, of course, but in Behn's text eros does indeed displace

7. Ibid., 322.
8. Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery*, p. 133. Their refusal to reproduce was accomplished for the most part by self-induced abortion, complimented by widespread veneral disease and malnutrition.

the representation of what I have been calling biology or women's capacity for reproduction—an elision that may be motivated by the desire to efface the womb as the site of resistance. Despite the length at which I have discussed them, Imoinda's pregnancy and the crisis in property relations it provokes take up a very small space in *Oroonoko*. In that small narrative space, though, the horrors of slavery surface for a short time. The fate of that unborn child brings the extraordinarily demeaning natal alienation of slavery to the foreground of the text. And through the highly unstable nature of Imoinda's body, the economic and ideological crisis brought about by the reproductive capacity of slave women in the Caribbean is brought briefly to bear on the novel.

Yet, when Imoinda is eliminated, all these other problems go with her. Like the child she bears, the baggage of cultural relevance that her pregnancy carries is effectively buried with her dead body. The battlefield of reproduction and the issues of cultural inheritance and power that it involves slide out of sight beneath conventional images of woman as a sexual icon. Throughout the novel the far more culturally accessible figure of a desirable woman is allowed to overshadow the image of a black female slave and the contradictions she embodies. In fact, I have argued here that in *Oroonoko* romantic love generally effaces the other problem of women as reproductive vessels—the political problem of biological generation is deflected onto the more conventional problem of managing Imoinda's erotic power.

The narrative of *Oroonoko* mounts a concerted effort on many different levels to refigure what might be the feared consequences of a brutal slave culture (bloody rebellion, massive escape) as the acknowledged consequences of a doomed love affair (mutual suicide, tragic self-sacrifice). Imoinda, both as a piece of property and as an erotic icon, is the instrument the narrative uses to effect this reorganization or even elision. Because her desirability is the cause of so many of the problems of the novel, the elimination or submission of her eroticized body can be constructed as the solution to both Oroonoko's problems and the narrative's. The political issue of slavery is almost entirely deflected onto the more conventional, more tasteful, and more easily resolved problem of heroic romance.

IV

I would suggest that this deflection is carried out to a large degree by the other woman in *Oroonoko*, the narrator. * * * In the midst of the brutal scene of Imoinda's murder—a scene in which I have claimed that cultural codes are forced to physical extremes—the narrator's voice observes: " 'tis not to be doubted, but the Parting, the eternal Leave taking of Two such Lovers, so greatly Born . . . so Beautiful, so Young, and so Fond, must be very Moving, as the Relation of it was to me afterwards." * * * The scene is reconstituted as a moving relation, a tragic love story that the narrator hopes will move her reader to sentimental response. In this perspective, Imoinda and Oroonoko are not captive people clinging to some remnant of cultural identity but rather any two noble, beautiful, young lovers doomed to a pitiful end.

* * * The narrator declares, in the last words of the novel, "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." She plans for Oroonoko and Imoinda to survive as a couple, possessing only the attributes of a moving relation.

Thus, the narrator herself seems to side with the forces of romance in the conflict between love and rebellion; that is, she sides with the status quo of slave culture. Just as the slave women use love to dissuade their husbands from further bloodshed, the narrator consistently rechannels traces of the pain of a captive culture into romantic conventions. * * * The novel and its narrator consistently place Imoinda so that the African woman can absorb the incipient violence of a slave culture into the tropes of eros.[9]

* * * Imoinda's glorious self-sacrifice and her perfect constancy and love provide the material for the construction of a self-consciously female narrator, a narrator, moreover, enshrined in feminist literary history as among the earliest of feminist individualist heroines. In this way the continual erasure of the African slave by the conventions of a romantic heroine forms the basis of a woman's literary voice, even as early as the end of the seventeenth century. * * * Thus, although we should see Behn's heroine as a crucial female voice in early modern English literature, we must also recognize the burden of racist discourse she must assume to speak as a white English woman.

Yet, the very need to kill Imoinda and the excessive violence of the series of mutilations her death inaugurates paradoxically allow into the text the issues they are designed to keep out. Imoinda's murder conjures up allusions to infanticide as the ultimate horror of slavery that must have been as much present in Behn's day as they are in ours. Furthermore, in the specific physical sites of mutilation—Imoinda's throat, Oroonoko's belly (and later his testicles)—the narrative points out possible sites of resistance. This kind of resistance, which is very different from the armed uprising the novel overtly treats, has nothing to do with conventional tropes of honor or glory. Instead, the circumstances of Imoinda's pregnancy and death demonstrate the lengths to which cap-

9. [The relationship between the white female narrator and the black female slave resembles the relationship Gayatri Spivak describes between Jane Eyre and Rochester's Caribbean first wife, Bertha Mason. . . . The "Reputation" of the narrator's "Female Pen" is surely based on Imoinda as the "self-immolating colonial subject." . . . See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," in "Race," *Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 270.]

tive persons will resist the appropriation of their reproductive capabilities by their captors. The violence in *Oroonoko* does not spring from a conflict between freedom and slavery but rather from Oroonoko's and Imoinda's need to preserve the property relations of family and culture in a situation that all but destroys them. Theirs is a resistance that tests the limits of a slave's control over his or her own biology and the limits of the connections between body and culture. And, although it can only be expressed negatively in *Oroonoko*, the "gynecological revolt" Patterson records suggests that such control may be much less alienable than one would think and that such resistance can be very powerful. Behind the mask of eros, Behn's novel, perhaps despite itself, allows the threatening image of a rebellious womb to show.

MARY BETH ROSE

Gender and the Heroics of Endurance in *Oroonoko*†

In late seventeenth-century England, traditional forms of male heroics—concerned with movement and adventure, rescue, exploration, and conquest—are undergoing redefinition in a culture in which all power relations involving hierarchy and subjection are being eagerly scrutinized and violently redesigned. Rather than focusing on a phallic heroics of action, many writers instead concentrate on a heroics of endurance which, with its emphasis on resistance, fortitude, and the patient suffering of pain, includes both genders among its protagonists. Indeed it is striking that the terms that constitute the heroics of endurance are precisely those terms used to construct the Renaissance idealization of woman: patient suffering, mildness, humility, chastity, loyalty, and obedience. In *Oroonoko* Aphra Behn deconstructs the phallic heroics of action by presenting a critique of physical strength as the source of male privilege; and she presents compromised agency, or agency inscribed in contradictions, as the defining condition of the heroic. In what follows I argue that this condition is female; and that it is represented first, in the hero's position of being seduced into slavery; and second, in the relation of the hero's slavery to marriage.

Oroonoko presents a problematic critique of late seventeenth-century English colonialism, with a particular emphasis on the slave trade. The story is divided both chronologically and geographically into two parts.

† Adapted from "The Heroics of Endurance in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, and Mary Astell's *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*" by Mary Beth Rose is from *Milton Studies* XXXIII (*The Miltonic Samson*), Albert C. Labriola and Michael Lieb, Guest Editors. © 1997 by University of Pittsburgh Press. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

The first presents the hero as an honored warrior-prince in his African home, a country called Coramantien, where his happiness with his beloved, Imoinda, is disrupted when the king (his grandfather) desires Imoinda, seizes her, and eventually sells her into slavery, telling Oroonoko she is dead. In the second half, the hero is himself sold into slavery and is transported to the English colony, Surinam, where he meets the English narrator, joyfully discovers and reunites with Imoinda, stages a doomed rebellion, and dies.

Oroonoko was written in 1688, at a time when the project of imperial expansion and the slave trade in England were thriving. As scholars have shown, there was an anti-slavery debate (although not couched in modern terms) in the late seventeenth century; but *Oroonoko* only arguably can be called an abolitionist text.[1] As noted, the African hero and his adored wife are both duplicitously betrayed into slavery, suffer outrages, and die horribly trying to escape their English masters. Aristocratic Coramantiens believe that the degradation of slavery is worse than death. Yet, as an African prince, Oroonoko himself trades in and owns slaves unambivalently, as a matter of right. Laura Rosenthal has demonstrated that slavery more often appears in this text as a class entitlement, rather than human injustice. She argues convincingly that Behn seems to mandate the slavery practiced by the aristocratic Africans, who win their slaves in battle and trade them as part of a gift economy that Behn sentimentally and conservatively idealizes. On the other hand, the author's critique of English slave trading practices takes the form of a Royalist condemnation of the greed and brazenness characterizing the Whiggish merchant forces that propel colonialism.[2]

Moreover, the narrator's own conflicted relation to slavery disturbingly qualifies the consistency of her critique. While struggling to escape the structures of Eurocentrism by sympathizing with Oroonoko and Imoinda and indignantly rejecting the outrages perpetrated upon them by the English, her sympathy and indignation are in fact deeply divided. The narrator's attitudes toward Oroonoko's blackness present a strong example of her ambivalence. Here is one instance of many in which she rhapsodizes about the prince's physical magnificence on one level while undercutting her praise with unacknowledged distaste on the other: "He was adorn'd with a native Beauty so transcending all those of his gloomy Race, that he strook an Awe and Reverence, even

1. See Laura Brown, "The Romance of Empire: *Oroonoko* and the Trade in Slaves," in *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, eds. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York, 1987), pp. 41–61 [reprinted in Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 23–63 — Editor]; and Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670–1834* (New York, 1992), pp. 3–49.
2. Laura J. Rosenthal, "Owning Oroonoko: Behn, Southerne, and the Contingencies of Property," in *Renaissance Drama*, New Series XXIII (Evanston, 1992), pp. 25–58.