

Katie Yocum

Dr. Lauren Rich

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Contradictions of Gender in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* quite clearly explores themes of race, specifically slavery, but Behn accomplished far more in this work than simply a proslavery or antislavery stance; she constructed her main characters, Oroonoko and Imoinda, in ways unusual for their respective genders. The traits, both physical and attitudinal, of Oroonoko and Imoinda, are not only important in terms of gender roles, but also in their defiance of those roles. Behn, throughout the text, crafts characters that defy gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles, both of which are important considering Behn's position as a female author.

Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave, is most often analyzed as a text focused on racism and slavery. This viewpoint, while valid, causes audiences to overlook the gender issues which Behn presents through her characters and her own voice as an author. This work is known for its unusual topic as well as Behn's feminine, authorial voice. Behn is quite conscious of her "female pen" and the story, while one of gender issues within her characters, also deals with "her struggle to represent herself as a female writer" (Ferguson 164; Salzman 13). At the opening of the novel, before she introduces Oroonoko or Imoinda, Behn voices her apprehensions and makes it clear to the audience that she understands her female voice is not as "reliable" as a man's: "What I have mentioned I have taken care should be truth, let the critical reader judge he pleases. 'Twill be no commendation to the book to assure your Lordship I writ it in a few hours, though it may serve

to excuse some of its faults of connection, for I never rested my pen a moment for thought: 'tis purely the merit of my slave that must render it worthy of the honour it begs; and the author of that subscribing herself" (Behn 3). Behn apologizes, in advance, for errors within the text — something that is unexpected for a professional author. Her lack of confidence seems to be, on the one hand, quite self-deprecating and, on the other hand, a display of Behn's control over her work — as if she knew how her story would be received by male readers before it was even published.

Behn admits to "fault" within her own work but, later, at the end of her work, she asserts her power and control over the story she has just told. By plainly telling the audience that *Oroonoko* is "only" a female work and that a man, with more intellect and wit, could have crafted the tale with more finesse and precision, Behn smartly has the first word — she does not allow her male readership to make harsh, misogynistic claims about her story — she does it herself. Behn is in complete control of the narrative, and her self-deprecating introduction proves to be an act of humility as Behn clearly possesses more than enough wit and skill to tell Oroonoko's story. Furthermore, Behn's authorship also highlights the importance Behn entrusts to the female narrator: "in contrast to the sublime masculine wit that would have omitted the crucial naturalness and simplicity of the tale for which the female pen has an innate affinity" (Brown 190). This "female affinity" is present throughout the entirety of the work, specifically within the character of Oroonoko, as he is described as beautiful and his acts as sentimental — both stereotypically "feminine" attributes (Thyvaert 11).

Oroonoko as a character is a clear example of the gender constructs that Behn breaks down throughout the story. Oroonoko's physical beauty is of the utmost importance to the female

narrator as she describes, quite artistically, every detail of his body. She paints a picture of his face stating that “The whole proportion and air of his face was so noble and exactly formed 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, by the aids of art, which was by pulling it out with a quill and keeping it combed, of which he took particular care” (Behn 10). While one can see the themes of race prevalent throughout the text, we also see the care with which the narrator describes each of Oroonoko’s features. It is almost as though the narrator is viewing Oroonoko as a sexual object. For most pieces of literature at this time, there were male authors and male narrators who spoke quite explicitly about females, but because of Behn’s unique position as a female author and her decision to make a female narrator, the traditional gender roles are reversed (Thyvaert 13).

Behn utilizes gender reversals throughout *Oroonoko* and her characters often act against stereotypes of their sex. Oroonoko, for instance, is shown to possess both feminine features and masculine behavior. And although *Oroonoko* is written by and narrated by a woman, and although Oroonoko’s wife Imoinda is a key player in the work, Oroonoko, the man, is still the protagonist. He demonstrates himself to be a courageous man, winning wars and battles frequently in his native land. Oroonoko also participates in activities that are stereotypically “manly:” running, wrestling, hunting, fishing, and killing tigers. These activities reinforce the idea of Oroonoko’s masculinity, even leading the female narrator to believe that he is superhuman: “he fought as if he came on purpose to die, and did such things as will not be believed that human strength could perform” (Behn 28). His masculinity reaches its peak when Imoinda becomes pregnant with their child: “From that happy day, Caesar took Clemene for his

wife... and in a very short time after, she conceived with child” (Behn 40). All of these occurrences prove that Oroonoko is the ideal man, one who is a strong and brave leader.

Though Oroonoko is the ideal for masculinity, he is also highly feminized. The physical descriptions of his body, face, and long hair are all stereotypically feminine. Although Oroonoko is known to be a brave man, he also behaves as “a long-suffering romance heroin,” as Lori Humphrey Newcomb asserts (Newcomb 283). Oroonoko is also presented as a sentimental, soft man, which is a trait most often attributed to women:

I have often heard him say that he admired by what strange inspiration he came to talk things so soft, and so passionate, who never knew love, nor was used to the conversation of women, but (to use his own words) he said, most happily, some new, until then unknown power instructed his heart and tongue in the language of love and at the same time in favour of him inspired Imoinda with a sense of his passion (Behn 12).

This potentially “flowery” description contradicts other representations of Oroonoko within the novel that highlight his abilities as a masculine warrior.

In opposition to Oroonoko, who possesses qualities both feminine and masculine, Imoinda, specifically in the latter half of the text, seems to be characterized solely by the qualities which make her *unfeminine*. Imoinda experiences a gender reversal because she does not behave in the way that a traditional wife, or a traditional woman, would. For instance, Imoinda is pregnant, and while this would normally be a sure sign of femininity, she joins Oroonoko in battle. She shows immense courage and dedication to the cause, as most male soldiers would. And as “big as she was, did nevertheless press near her lord, having a bow and a quiver full of poisoned arrows, which she managed with such dexterity that she wounded several,

and shot the governor into the shoulder, of which wound he had like to have died, but that an Indian woman, his mistress, sucked the wound, and cleansed it” (Behn 55). Imoinda is highly skilled, and does not allow her pregnancy or the traditional role of femininity to hinder her from fighting alongside her husband. One of the simplest devices Behn uses “is to endow her female heroes with male clothes, weapons, language, money, or other symbols of male power” (Pearson 181). Imoinda rejects traditional femininity and instead chooses bravery.

Where Oroonoko battled femininity and masculinity, Imoinda’s rejection of stereotypical femininity reaches its pinnacle when she fatally wounds the governor with the poisoned arrow, had he not been saved by one of his own. Imoinda’s defiance of a traditional feminine role is also displayed at the end of the work when she and Oroonoko agree that it is better for her to die than to remain a slave. Imoinda does not respond to this proposal emotionally, instead she logically considers the options and the consequences, and understands that death is the best solution. She does not fear death, she is not emotional or hesitant like other women in literature might be — she embraces death: “He [Oroonoko] found the heroic wife faster pleading for death than he was to propose it” (Behn 61). Throughout this scene, Oroonoko is presented as quite emotional or sentimental, whereas Imoinda embodies valor and self-sacrifice. Imoinda’s death also highlights the differences between the lovers and their response to death. Oroonoko “drew his knife to kill this treasure of his soul, this pleasure of his eyes, while tears trickled down his cheeks, hers were smiling with joy she should die by so noble a hand” (Behn 61). The reactions of Imoinda and Oroonoko are in stark contrast with each other as Oroonoko is emotional and pained whereas Imoinda experiences “joy” as she bravely faces death by the hand of her Oroonoko.

Throughout *Oroonoko*, Behn makes her female authorial voice, and the female voice of the narrator, abundantly clear. This causes the underlying theme of *Oroonoko* to be one of gender, and specifically traditional gender roles. Behn has complete authority over this work, and yet she apologizes for it in advance, which implies that she anticipates a negative response from readers before her novel is even published. Behn also uses her femininity, her unique perspective, to grapple with gender roles within the text. Oroonoko, the strong African prince, is described as a hero, but also given many feminine qualities like sentimentality and a beautiful face. Oroonoko's wife Imoinda, on the other hand, is given many traditionally "masculine" qualities; Imoinda fights by her husband's side in battle, and bravely chooses death. Both characters defy the traditional expectations of their respective genders, just as Behn defied the expectations placed upon her as a female author at that time.

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