

Modes of seduction as political discourse in aphra behn's "oroonoko"



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‘ The telling of a story of seduction is also a mode of seduction.’ (Ros Ballaster)

In our contemporary world, to ‘ seduce’ or be ‘ seduced’ often has a sexual connotation, of a person persuading another, using various techniques, to engage in a sexual act with them. However, whilst this kind of seduction is apparent in Aphra Behn’s work, seduction can also mean, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary: ‘ to lead (a person) astray in conduct or belief; to draw away from the right or intended course of action to or into a wrong one.’ This definition suggests that seduction is a kind of deception or sabotage; the difference being that seduction is an attractive and subtle art. Seduction, both sexual and deceptive, is prevalent in Behn’s *Oroonoko*, with the king’s failed seduction of Imoinda, the false promises of the slave-traders, and perhaps most significantly, the narrator’s own seduction of the reader; indeed making the ‘ story of seduction’ a ‘ mode of seduction.’ If indeed Ballaster’s statement is true, it implies that Behn’s story is a measured and deliberate attempt to lead the reader into believing something, an attempt perhaps to lead her contemporary readers away from conventional opinion. This essay will explore the different kinds of seduction Behn both depicts and enacts on her reader in order to express political opinion and criticism.

If Behn’s book is a ‘ mode’ of seduction, then this seduction must be mediated through the narrator, whom many assume is a version of Behn herself, who was said to have travelled to Surinam. Behn’s protagonist and hero is black, a fact which raises a problem of trying to get a readership who believed that black people were inferior to white to sympathise with this

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hero. ' Seduction' here works in two ways, firstly in seducing the audience into sympathy for Oroonoko, an effect achieved by portraying those within the novel as being seduced by him. At the very outset of the book, the narrator presents an opinion of Oroonoko's character before we encounter him for ourselves, stating ' we [...] were perfectly charmed with the character of this great man,'¹ with the collective pronoun ' we' allowing the reader to anticipate that they too, will be similarly charmed. Behn's use of a white, English, female narrator is key in providing a reliable figure in whom the reader can place their trust, and whether or not the narrator herself is seductive is not necessarily relevant to what Behn is trying to achieve; rather, it is the narrator's experience of being seduced by Oroonoko that is significant:

' His face was not that of a brown, rusty black which most of that nation are, but a perfect ebony, or polished jet. [...] His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His mouth, the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turned lips, which are so natural to the rest of Negroes.'

Not only here is Oroonoko's beauty depicted in the words of a white woman, but she also attributes incredibly Euro-centric features to him, such as a ' rising roman nose,' and ' fine shaped' lips; setting him apart distinctly from the other ' Negroes.' In fact, from the initial description given by the narrator, Oroonoko is in every way like a white person other than his ' perfect ebony' skin. This is where the finely tuned ' art' of seduction comes in; the contemporary reader is presented with a man who is in every way like the white people they know, with European values, ' he has heard of, and admired the Romans,'³ with the only difference being his skin, meaning he

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becomes much less an alien ‘other’ to Behn’s contemporaries, who were unlikely to have associated beauty with blackness, and instead becomes seductive and enticing because he possesses ‘ideal’ European beauty yet with black skin. Additionally, this passage hones in on the particulars of Oroonoko’s face, his nose, his skin, and his lips, the latter of these being a sexually seductive feature. Indeed, Oroonoko possesses many of the features of a person universally considered to be attractive, and subsequently seductive, and in the very act of Behn having a narrator depict these, the reader is seduced alongside her.

Imoinda is a similarly beautiful and seductive ‘exception’ to the rest of her ethnic group:

‘[her] face and person was so exceeding all he had ever beheld; that lovely modesty with which she received him, that softness in her look[.]’

Again, Imoinda, even though described through the narrator’s depiction of what Oroonoko saw in her, is awarded attributes considered attractive in Western culture, those being ‘modesty’ and ‘softness’ as well as her obvious physical beauty. Where as readers we are seduced by both Oroonoko and Imoinda by the narrator, Behn presents differing kinds of seduction; a seduction which is pure and based on the good and noble qualities of something or someone (as with our affection towards Oroonoko and Imoinda), and seduction which is superficial, false, and deceptive. Indeed, the narrator, at the start of the novel likens the native people to ‘our first parents before the Fall,’ a simile which explicitly suggests that the natives, including both Oroonoko and Imoinda are pure, untainted and

innocent. Indeed, in a similar way to Adam and Eve's pure, unlustful love before the Fall, the courtship between Oroonoko and Imoinda involves none of the deception or deceit that 'seduction' may imply. Rather, their interactions are presented as reciprocal and unforced:

'he told her with his eyes that he was not insensible of her charms; while Imoinda, who wished for nothing more than so glorious a conquest, was pleased to believe she understood that silent language of new-born love[.]'

Behn splits the sentence here into two almost equal clauses, one concerning Oroonoko and the other concerning Imoinda, expressing the balance in the mutual affection the two share. Additionally, Behn chooses 'conquest' to refer to Oroonoko, interesting as this places Imoinda in a dominant position over him, reversing the conventional gender roles in Behn's era. This reciprocal, pure, unadulterated courtship stands in opposition to the attempted seduction of Imoinda by the king:

'now grown to his second childhood, [he] longed with impatience to behold this gay thing, with whom, alas, he could but innocently play.'

Here there is a stark contrast in Behn's use of language, which is no longer heightened and poetic as with 'nothing more than so glorious a conquest,' but short and plain. The words 'childhood' and 'play' suggest an innocence, but a perverted one rather than something truly pure. The depiction of gaze and eyes is also subverted; whereas Oroonoko tells Imoinda 'with his eyes' of his love and she understands that 'silent language,' here the king longs to 'behold' Imoinda, an objectifying and onesided action. As Laura J. Rosenthal suggests in her essay on Behn, women, and society, Behn 'vehemently
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attacks the immorality of forced marriages and her heroine vigorously express the loathsomeness of being forced to marry a rich old man as no better than rape,' and indeed Imoinda receives the king's veil with 'surprise and grief.'⁸⁴ It seems therefore, that in terms of sexual seduction within the book, Behn purposefully presents us with a reciprocal and unadulterated seduction in contrast with a forceful and manipulative seduction in order to express her distaste at her own society's acceptance of this latter kind of seduction forced upon women. Through her narrator, we are seduced by the nobility and beauty of both Oroonoko and Imoinda but repulsed by the king, placing our sympathies firmly with the former couple.

Another kind of seduction arises in the enticing prospect of colonialism and new lands; this however being another kind of seduction that is false and superficial, for it is tainted by the violence of the English colonialists; Susan Z. Andrade commenting that 'Behn depicts the system of colonial slave labour as dangerously unstable and constantly hovering on the edge of unspeakable violence.' In a similar way to the gender politics Behn expresses through the seduction of Imoinda by the king, Behn allows her reader to be seduced by colonialism before revealing its atrocities in order to criticise it to some degree:

'it affords all things both for beauty and use; 'tis there eternal spring, always the very months of April, May and June.'

This description stands in bleak contrast to the later description of the landscape, after Oroonoko has been driven to murder Imoinda:

‘ they smelt an unusual smell, as of a dead body, for stinks must be very noisome that can be distinguished among such a quantity if natural sweets, as every inch of that land produces.’

In this latter extract, it is clear that all the ‘ beauty’ and sweetness of the foreign land has been spoiled and tainted, the ‘ noisome’ smell of Imoinda’s body penetrating the ‘ natural sweets’ and signalling that though superficially seductive, the lands the English colonised have been ruined by their violent atrocities. In a similar way to Behn’s comparison of the native Africans to Adam and Eve before the fall, the foreign lands are in themselves innocent and pure and for that reason seductive; by seducing the readers with the beauty of these lands Behn allows them to fall into the same trap of the colonialists who taint the land through their violence.

In the very act of writing a narrator who is seduced, Behn indeed attempts to seduce the audience; for the white female narrator acts as a familiar voice for her contemporaries. Oroonoko is concerned in many ways with seduction; some of this being innocent and enticing, and some of it being dangerous and misleading. For the most part, innocent and harmless seduction can be found in that which belongs to the non-white characters in the book, whilst the white characters practice deceptive and self-serving seduction. It is these modes of seduction that Behn uses as a means by which to raise contention against the gender issues and colonialist practices of her time.