

"contrary to the custom of his country..." : gender and values in oroonoko



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Aphra Behn's genre-blending tale *Oroonoko* melds travel narrative with fictional biography to tell the story of Prince Oroonoko, "the royal slave." Although Behn writes of Oroonoko's honor as unique among men, her admiration for him seems to derive directly from how closely he mirrors the prime model of a nobly descended, Christian Englishman. Indeed, Behn measures and praises Oroonoko's masculinity only in terms of these parallels. Other males, such as Oroonoko's grandfather, are emasculated through their failure to conform to these standards. The femininity of Oroonoko's bride, Imoinda, is also a subject of praise in that it embodies the normative values of beauty and modesty of the time. This essay argues that Behn's juxtaposition of native qualities with values of the period constructs the gender of her characters in such a way that they function only as dark-skinned representatives of white virtue. Furthermore, this paper will analyze the texts of *Oroonoko* and Addison and Steele's *The Spectator* to demonstrate how certain writers of the time dealt with "the other" via subjective cultural standards. Behn introduces us to Oroonoko as an African warrior-prince in possession of unusually Caucasian physical traits. She writes, "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 the negroes" (8). Under the tutelage of a Frenchman, he acquired a knowledge of language, science and morality. Behn partially attributes Oroonoko's "humanity" to this tutelage. Not only is he an impressive speaker of English, but is also able to carry on a conversation in English with as much wit and charm as a native speaker. From her alleged personal interactions with Oroonoko, Behn claims, "He had nothing of barbarity in his nature, but in all points addressed himself as if his

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education had been in some European court" (7). From these details it becomes apparent that Behn's delight in Oroonoko stems from his European trappings. In many ways, Oroonoko becomes the "noble anti-savage" (although a solid definition of the "noble savage" has not yet emerged at this time). As opposed to his nobility coming through minimal contact with civilization, he is instead commended for his ability to learn from the white men he encounters. Much more attention is devoted to his ability for English mimicry than his African qualities. Behn states his skin color to be of "perfect ebony," unlike the common "rusty black" of his nation, but still regards it as an obstacle to the consummation of his beauty (8). Oroonoko's sexual behavior also is set apart from that of his fellow countrymen because it follows a code of monogamy. He promises his new wife, Imoinda, that "contrary to the custom of his country, he made her vows she should be the only woman he would possess while he lived" (10). This is yet another instance in which Behn projects Christian values onto Oroonoko in order to set him apart from his race. Thus, few of his admirable traits lie in his separation from English culture. As Behn creates less shining examples of Oroonoko's countrymen, it seems that Oroonoko has overcome his race and that therein lies his value. Oroonoko's grandfather, the King of Cormantien, is portrayed as a man of excess. His palace teems with women whose sole function is to please him. Despite his innumerable women, the king desires Imoinda. In an act of duplicity, he orders his servants to bring her the royal veil (a symbol that she must come to the king's bed or be punished by death) while his grandson is out hunting. Yet the king exemplifies the emasculatory qualities of sin, for his repeated lasciviousness has robbed him of his sexual virility. Once Oroonoko and Imoinda finally reunite, Imoinda

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claims "...that she remained a spotless maid till that night, and that what she did with his grandfather had robbed him of no part of her virgin-honor..."

(19). Because Oroonoko is pure for Imoinda, he "ravished in a moment what his old grandfather had been endeavoring for so many months" (19). Despite her libertine practices, Behn condemns the polyamorous practices of Oroonoko's people and praises, instead, marriage and monogamy. Although many of Oroonoko's qualities reflect Behn's religious values, she does not choose to depict Oroonoko as a Christian. This choice seems to stem from Behn's desire to condemn those who identify with Christianity, but do not follow its teachings. For example, Oroonoko's first encounter with Christianity occurs after his capture, when a sea captain deceives him into enslavement by swearing upon the Christian god that he will release him once the ship reaches shore (27). In reaction to this deceit, Oroonoko says, "Farewell, Sir, 'tis worth my suffering to gain so true a knowledge both of you and of your gods by whom you swear" (29). Behn's later attempts to engage him in discourse of the Trinity fall are ignored. Oroonoko's resentment of Christian religion is portrayed as unfortunate, but justified. Even so, his values mirror the religion so closely that his official rejection of it becomes negligible. Behn also measures femininity by the standards of European Christendom. Oroonoko's bride, Imoinda, is repeatedly described as possessing "modesty and extraordinary prettiness" (34). She is the constant object of white desire, and is often claimed to elicit more sighs than many "white beauties" (34). Much of the text is devoted to praising a beauty so great that it becomes a burden. The preservation of the virtue of her body becomes the focal point of Imoinda's fate. Her purity is constantly

threatened and/or put into question, and her agency dwindles as her

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circumstances give her decreasingly less control over her body. When captured by the king, he obligates her to "swear thyself a maid" (11). Once she and Oroonoko are reunited, she is compelled to swear that the king had not deprived him of her maidenhood. Upon the king's discovery that Imoinda and Oroonoko have copulated, he sells Imoinda into slavery, for after being possessed by a family member, to touch her would be "the greatest crime in nature amongst 'em," she was now "a polluted thing, wholly unfit for his embrace" (21). This action hinges completely on the state of Imoinda's body, for before, the king found no fault in usurping her from her husband as long as she had remained pure. There is no detailed account of Imoinda's time in slavery before Oroonoko finds her once again. However, from Trefry's account we can derive that she spent the majority of her time warding off admirers (including Trefry) and retaining the purity of her body. Trefry recounts of his attempts that "she disarms me with that modesty and weeping, so tender and so moving that I retire, and thank my stars she overcame me" (33). Finally, Imoinda's heartrending death is enacted by her husband as part of his plan to take revenge on the white men who betrayed him. He fears that if he dies in his attempts, Imoinda would be left behind and "ravaged by every brute, exposed first to their nasty lusts, and then a shameful death" (53). As a "heroic wife," she wholeheartedly obeys her husband, "for wives have a respect for their husbands equal to what any other people pay a deity" (54). In this act, therefore, Imoinda embodies the ideal wife and the pinnacle of femininity—more willing to die by the hand of her husband than to have her virtue threatened by strangers. Addison and Steele's *The Spectator* introduces a narrative with similar Eurocentric tactics.

The frame story of Inkle and Yarico is told by a woman of high stature who is <https://assignbuster.com/contrary-to-the-custom-of-his-country-gender-and-values-in-oroonoko/>

challenging the assertion that women are ruthless and fickle in matters of romantic love. Yarico, an Indian princess, provides food and shelter to a stranded Englishman named Inkle. The reader becomes aware that Yarico is of nobility in that her style of dress is vaguely European: " She was, it seems, a person of distinction, for she every day came to him in a different dress, of the most beautiful shells, bugles and bredes" (2481). The two become enamored with one another and Yarico tells Inkle that she is pregnant with his child, but upon his rescue, Inkle sells Yarico into the slave trade. In the majority of the narrative, Yarico is portrayed as the provider while Inkle passively waits in his shelter. At night, " Her part was to watch and hold him in her arms, for fear of her countrymen, and wake him on occasions to consult his safety" (2481). Much like Oroonoko, Inkle is set apart from her countrymen in her European resonances and her insistence on protecting an Englishman. She is portrayed as an exception to the rule, not as a positive representative of Native Americans. In her beauty, compassion and morality, she is the model of femininity. Yarico's sale into slavery, as a virtuous woman of " distinction," pulls the reader's heartstrings. There is no such compassion for Inkle, who has forfeited his masculinity both by lacking Christ-like compassion and by being willing to be provided for by a woman. This conflation of gender, virtue and status, seen both in Oroonoko and the Spectator, renders characters flat. Their lack of dimensionality and interiority cripple any representation of difference. They become a blank canvas for European traits, and their skin color or bodily carvings (which mark their distinction) become secondary to their successful mirroring of English virtue, nobility, purity and beauty. They are endowed, instead, with a sense of " true" manhood and womanhood. In the case of Oroonoko's grandfather, his

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practices are distinctly "othered," and this disparity posits him as an inadequate man. Oddly enough, in the case of Oroonoko, Imoinda and Yarico, their success in emulation does not save them from a fate of slavery or death.