

The Sexual Construction of Male and  
Female Characters in Aphra Behn's  
*Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave*

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## 1. Introduction

Aphra Behn was a prominent woman writer in the Renaissance, a period that suffered from some misogynistic attitudes (Salzman, xxiii). During this time, it was thus quite courageous for women to try to make a living out of writing without using a pseudonym or publishing anonymously. She was the first professional British female author and she often had to cope with male critics. In order to make a change, she had to break the culturally accepted gender rules and for this reason, she is an inspiration for all the future women writers. Aphra Behn was a talented author and she mastered the skills of several genres, which led to a very versatile oeuvre: she wrote poetry, prose fiction, playwrights and she even picked up the abilities to translate existing literary works. Her writing even shaped the foundation of the development of the English novel. Behn's oeuvre is also known for her strong female protagonists and her critique on society, especially regarding gender issues. She was seen as a threatening figure and she did not hesitate to undermine the masculine world of writing (Salzman, ix). She uses her fictional work to bring attention to delicate subjects such as slavery, adultery, incest, etcetera. An example of one of Behn's ground breaking novels is *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave*, which will be the foundation of my master dissertation.

*Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave* was published in 1688, a year before the death of Aphra Behn (Erickson 201). It tells the story of a young African prince. The first part of the novella takes place in Coramantien. Oroonoko falls madly in love with the beautiful Imoinda, but his grandfather, who is king, gives her the royal veil, thus thereby claiming her as his mistress. However, being impotent, the old king cannot sexually own Imoinda and when Oroonoko takes her virginity, she can no longer belong to the king. Infuriated by Oroonoko's betrayal, he sells Imoinda as a slave, which was considered to be worse than being killed. When Oroonoko gets tricked by a befriended captain into slavery and is sold to the friendly Trefry, the two lovers meet again in Surinam, which is the setting of the second part of the short story. When

blacks are sold as slaves, they get a new 'Europeanised' name, since a lot of African names were hard to pronounce. On the plantation, Oroonoko was known as Caesar and Imoinda's new name was Clemene. Fighting for the freedom of himself, Imoinda and their future child, Oroonoko inspires his fellow slaves to rebel against their white owners and to flee from the plantation. However, the other slaves betray Oroonoko by yielding when governor Byam catches them and Oroonoko is severely punished with a brutal whipping. After recovering from his numerous wounds, Oroonoko starts planning his revenge. Afraid that his beloved Imoinda might end up in the arms of the cruel slave-owners, he asks Imoinda's permission to kill her. After taking her life, Oroonoko is overwhelmed with grief and he fails to execute his plan. In the end, he is brutally executed by being dismembered as a lesson to all the other black slaves to not disobey the white owners.

In this paper, I would like to investigate the construction of the male and female characters in *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave* as sexual beings. In what way does Behn criticise the treatment of women, as individuals and as a group, in both marriage and in slavery and what are the differences and equalities between the male and the female race? In order to find an answer to these questions, it is first necessary to examine the debate on the distinction between the concepts 'sexuality' and 'gender' and to point out the link between gender and race. Furthermore, I will take a closer look at Behn's personal life as a female author and the truthfulness of her seemingly autobiographic narrative. I will also discuss the main characteristics of her female based oeuvre and explain why the woman writer is adored by so many feminists. Moving on to the specific case of *Oroonoko*, the importance of Behn's female pen is established by examining her struggle to represent herself as a confident female author who is worthy of reporting the story of such a brave man. Although *Oroonoko* is depicted as a courageous man, there are several features that indicate a feminisation of the gorgeous male protagonist, including the description of his physical appearance. His female



partner likewise is thoroughly described by her beauty. The physical characteristics of both Oroonoko and Imoinda are not only important in terms of gender issues, they also indicate a racial distinction with the rest of their African culture. However, building further on the gender differences which were discussed relating to the beautiful appearances of the two lovers, a shift in the traditional gender roles is observed by closely examining the multiple gender reversals in the novel. But even though women can act in a more masculine way, both through marriage and through slavery are they still being treated as property, which is an allusion on the way English women are treated in marriage. However, male and female characters are not always opposed in the narrative. Behn both shows examples of an equal and a divergent treatment towards both sexes. In the end, the importance of the female figure is emphasised by the constant presence of women throughout the entire novel.

## 2. Defining the Term 'Sexuality'

Firstly, I briefly want to touch the debate on the distinction between the two terms 'sexuality' and 'gender'. As Friedman explains, sexuality and gender were two different things during the Renaissance. On the one hand, sex referred to the biological side of sexuality, being the genitalia and chromosomes etcetera. And on the other hand, the term gender was used as a reference to a social group and this concept mainly focused on the social and cultural side of femininity and masculinity, for example how they dressed differently, how their language use differentiated, how their function in society varied etcetera (Friedman 200). However, these two concepts are nowadays often characterised as variables since it is believed that they are both socially constructed. The fact that both terms contain a social aspect can also be proven by their several definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary. Defining sexuality as "sexual nature, instinct, or feelings; the possession or expression of these" includes both biological (possession of sexual nature and instinct) and social (expression of feelings) elements, in my opinion. Therefore, in this paper, I will not make a distinction between the terms 'gender' and 'sexuality'. I want to base my analysis of sexuality and gender on the following definition of gender in the Oxford English Dictionary: "males or females viewed as a group; =sex. Also : the property or fact of belonging to one of these groups", because this definition literally equalises both concepts.

Furthermore, the reception of gender in the Renaissance and the particular role women then had in society can also be categorised in different ideologies. Susan Staves discusses three diverse and clashing understandings of the appropriate function and value of women during Behn's lifetime: firstly a religious ideology brought by the Church of England, secondly a legal or economic ideology and lastly a libertine ideology (Staves 12). The first and most dominant ideology implied that women were created by God to worship Him and to unite themselves with men through marriage. A woman was obliged to obey her husband,

while the husband in return was to support his wife. The exclusive duty of women was to bare children and to multiply (Staves 13). Secondly, the legal and economic ideology only saw women as instruments to secure or increase family property through marriage, which often led to forced marriages for financial reasons (Staves 15,18). During the Renaissance, there was only one heir who inherited the entire family fortune. The property was not divided amongst all children. The eldest son received everything and this way, they secured their upper-class position (Staves 15). Thus, it was important for daughters (and younger brothers) to marry an upper-class man (or woman) to secure their ranking, to keep up the good family name and to be able to continue their way of living (Staves 16). The third and last ideology was the most attracting one. Libertinism praised nature instead of what they perceived as religious superstition and most importantly, they argued that physical pleasure was possible, both for men and women. While the traditional Church viewed adultery and fornication as sins, these actions were accepted by libertinism (Staves 20). Nevertheless, the downside of this ideology was the fact that it was mainly masculine orientated. They were hateful towards marriage but not everything about marriage was bad, there were also happily married women. Also, libertines only saw women as created by nature to serve the pleasures of men and this could sometimes lead to violent affairs (Staves 21).

These three views claimed to represent the traditional understandings of women's true function in society, but not everybody had sympathy for these strict ideologies and at a certain point, all three views had to cope with critique. For example women writer Aphra Behn raised questions in her entire oeuvre about these different interpretations of how women should behave and what their function should be. By commenting on these ideologies, Behn makes it clear to her readers that she found none of them fully acceptable (Staves 12). Works as *The Fair Jilt*, *The Unfortunate Bride*, *The Adventure of the Black Lady* etcetera undoubtedly play with the traditional views, which is often already obvious just by reading the title. Behn's

writing includes critique on each ideology individually, both explicitly as well as covertly mentioned in the details. However, criticism on a gender-based society is handled in a completely different way in the short novel *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave*. Due to its unique setting, both socially and geographically, Behn cannot link sexuality with religion, legal heritage or libertinism in this narrative, but she connects gender with race. Laura Brown even calls the novel a "theoretical test case for the necessary connection of race and gender" (Brown 182). Gender obviously means a focus on the differences between men and women and race signifies blackness, more specifically the battle between white colonials and black slaves. The story of Oroonoko is often received as an anti-slavery tale and because of Behn's prominent critiques on slavery, readers can overlook the gender issues which are also present in the novel. Both male and female blacks belong to the group of slaves and they are both treated in a disrespectful way. Moreover, not only the female slaves do suffer from misogynistic attitudes, also the white narrator has to cope with white male dominance.

### 3. Aphra Behn as a Female Writer and as a Female Narrator

Aphra Behn is both the name of the author of *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave*, as well as the name of the female narrator and character in the second part of the story, which takes place in Surinam. The fact that Behn uses her own name in the novel, for a long while raised the question whether the story can be considered autobiographical or not. It opened a debate amongst several researchers about the truthfulness of the given events and also about the accuracy of the information provided about Surinam's inhabitants and its fauna and flora. The indistinctness of Aphra Behn actually having lived in Surinam or not was heavily discussed and it led to divergent opinions. For instance, while some critics believed Behn's story and its vivid descriptions to be true, Ernest Bernbaum was strongly convinced that Behn was a liar and he accused her of representing fiction as truth. He claimed that the female writer never lived in Surinam and he even argued that she had never set foot in that country at all. According to Bernbaum, the descriptions of Surinam which Behn uses in her short story for instance to describe its nature, are a reproduction of similar definitions of that region which are portrayed in a book written by a certain George Warren, which was already produced in 1667 (Goreau 43). Keeping in mind that *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave* was published a year later, made this assumption a possibility, which could mean that there could be some truth in Bernbaum's theory.

However, in the last years, more and more research has been done about the figure of Aphra Behn and new information was discovered about her life which clearly confirmed her stay in Surinam (Salzman xi). Evidence of her presence there was delivered by a scholar named Harrison Gray Platt. By studying the private correspondence between Sir Robert Harley and his representatives in Surinam, he discovered proof that Aphra Behn indeed inhabited this country. Following his research, more evidence was found by examining contemporary documents such as official papers, letters, etcetera. This documentation does

not only contain proof of the historical existence of certain unfamiliar figures Aphra Behn mentions in her writing, it also includes detailed descriptions which are equal to Behn's definitions of the power parties in the colony, the Indians, the black slaves, etcetera (Goreau 43-44). Nevertheless, the fact that the female author indeed did reside in Surinam, does not automatically mean that *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave* should be entirely interpreted as truth. Although the narrator emphasises the reality of the events in the narrative and the fact that she herself was "an eye-witness to a great part of what you will find here set down", it is the task of the reader to detach the author Behn from the female narrator and character Behn (Behn 6). The critical reader must also attempt to separate the elements of truth with the fictional aspects in the novel and thus experience Behn's social criticism in his own way.

Finding critique in Aphra Behn's oeuvre is not a hard task, since her fictional work is characterised by her social engagement. As Paul Salzman describes it: "for her own contemporaries, she was a threatening figure who undermined certain assumptions about the masculine realms of letters, drama, politics, intrigue" (Salzman ix). Hence, cultural differences regarding class, race and gender are key concepts in her entire oeuvre. She examines the distinction between the opposite sexes and the equal rights of women are also explored. Her strong female protagonists are continuously in search for feminine power. They struggle to deal with male authority and they wish to obtain and exercise authority of their own. Contrasting with those powerful women, Behn also shows weak and powerless female characters, for instance the group of obedient female black slaves in *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave*, who undergo a low-status life, due to their gender. By opposing these two types of women in her work, she creates an opportunity for her readers to criticise the conditions of women in general (Pearson 1996, 220). Therefore, Behn's work is often cited by feminists and she was an inspiration for future women writers, e.g. Virginia Woolf describes Aphra Behn as a female author of great importance and as a symbolic figure for women writers in general.

Woolf even recommends all women to pay their respect to Behn by letting "flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, which is, most scandalously but rather appropriately, in Westminster Abbey, for it was she who earned them the right to speak" (Salzman iv). But Woolf only sees Behn as an iconic figure instead of an actual author. Woolf idealises the female writer because she had to work very hard to earn enough money to live on. The poems, playwrights and novels Behn actually wrote, were of less importance and could not outweigh the priority of her independence as a female author and as a woman in general (Salzman iv).

Therefore, not only the themes of Behn's writing made her a feminist icon, the fact that she was the first professional female author in Britain also contributed to the feminist adoration of Aphra Behn. She did not publish anonymously or use a pseudonym like some other female writers would do, but she openly practised literature as a woman using her own name. During the Renaissance, the literary world was already shaped by men, who in contrast to female writers of that generation had the opportunity to acquire a literary education by studying language in universities (Goreau 280). Even though Behn had no classical literary education, her access to the art of literacy made it possible for her to learn to read and write in English. Eventually, her linguistic abilities led to a full professional literary career and it permitted her to earn her living as a female author, which was not common in the Renaissance (Ferguson 213-214). Behn needed an income, since her father died and left her with no inheritance. However, women were not supposed to work in the seventeenth century. It was considered inappropriate and women who struggled financially usually looked for social security by marrying or becoming a mistress and thereby leaving themselves in the hands of male dominance (Goreau 71). Behn refused to surrender herself to the tradition of the male-dominated culture and thus took her faith in her own hands by becoming an independent professional female writer. Moreover, Behn not only had an impact on literature because of these feminist reasons, her writing also strongly influenced the development of the novel as a

new genre.

An example of one of Behn's progressive novels is *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave*. This narrative is characterised by its unusual rural and cultural setting and Behn's feminine engagement is also prominently present. The author is very aware of her 'female pen' and the story is partly concerned with "her struggle to represent herself as a female writer" (Salzman xiii). Already in the very beginning of the novel, even before the story of the African prince begins, does Behn express her concerns:

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 5)

Behn wants to apologise in advance for mistakes she made during the writing process. By doing so, she already admits to the reader that her writing will contain errors. This is not something you would expect from someone with a professional literary career. It seems as if the female writer is not confident about her own work. However, Behn provides an explanation for the faults she made. She states that she writ the novel in only a few hours' time, without resting her pen "a moment for thought". This can indicate that the female author was driven by emotions during her writing process. The fact that she never even stopped a moment to think rationally, is what distinguishes a sentimental woman from a rational man. Thus, by apologizing for making errors due to her uninterrupted writing process, I believe that she implicitly also excuses herself for writing with a sentimental, female pen.

The sensibility of the woman writer and/or the female narrator is also proven with her next quote further in the short novel: "But his misfortune was to fall in an obscure world, that



afforded only a female pen to celebrate his fame" (Behn 40). This phrase can be read in two different ways. Firstly, it can be an expression that again emphasises the sentimental aspect of the narrative. As Brown accurately describes it, "the narrator herself makes it still more evident that the romantic hero is the production and expression of a female sensibility, of only a female pen" (Brown 190). Only a woman writer has the abilities to write the tale of such a romantic, passionate character as Oroonoko. By explicitly referring to her female pen, Behn focuses the attention on sexuality differences in the literary world and she thereby defines her position as a writer, which is crucially formed by her gender (Ferguson 214). Nonetheless, a second reading of the quote with another intonation on the word 'only' makes it also possible that Behn wants to indicate that hers is 'only' a female pen, meaning that it is not worth the same as the one of a male author. This explanation only came to mind when reading the last paragraph of the story:

Thus died this great man; worthy of a better fate, and a more sublime wit than mine to write his praise; yet 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. (Behn 73)

By wishing that the story could have been reported by "a more sublime wit than mine", the former quote is put in another light and the female author again doubts her own writing. However, the last paragraph is also characterised by a contradiction. Although Behn prefers the story to be told by someone with a more sublime wit, she believes that her "reputation (...) is considerable enough" (Pearson 1991, 184). According to Pearson, despite the fact that Behn had a conflicting attitude towards her literary work, the narrator (ambiguously) announces her own power in the end (Pearson 1991, 189). But telling the reader that hers is 'only' a female pen and that someone with a masculine wit perhaps could have done a better job writing this story to glorify Oroonoko, shows how Behn feels about her female writing and how she

struggles with it. It is a true act of modesty and moreover, it also notifies the significant relevance Behn gives 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). The female affinity is noticeable throughout the entire story, for instance how Oroonoko's sentimental acts are described or how the beautiful bodies of the African prince and his beloved one are portrayed with such an eye for detail.

#### 4. The Physical Aspect: the Description of the Body and its Beauty

##### 4.1. Oroonoko

When we first meet the two main characters of the short novel, both Oroonoko and Imoinda are presented as ideal figures and they are characterised by their overwhelming beauty. The first description of Oroonoko is very lengthy and the narrator emphasises every part of his face:

He was pretty tall, but of a shape the most exact that can be fancied. The most famous statuary could not form the figure of a man more admirably turned from head to foot. His face was not of that brown, rusty black which most of that nation are, but a perfect ebony, or polished jet. His eyes were the most awful that could be seen and very piercing, the white of 'em being like snow, as were his teeth. 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. 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 11-12)

Clearly, Oroonoko's physical beauty is of great importance to the female narrator. She lingers over every aspect of his face, pausing to describe every feature with great detail. It seems as if the narrator is looking at him with an erotic gaze and thereby making Oroonoko an object of her own sexual desires (Visconsi 683). Usually, it was female characters who were made

object to the narrator's desires, but since the story is told from a female perspective, the roles are reversed. Moreover, Behn also mentions Oroonoko's long hair, which he carefully combed and took great care of. I believe that such a description is something you would expect of a female character. Oroonoko is supposed to be a powerful, brave man who rebels and fights tigers. It would make more sense if the narrator took the time to comment on his muscles and fierceness, rather than on his beautiful hair and ideal face. A fearless man is not supposed to have smooth hair and a perfect skin, but is expected to at least have some scars and bruises. By describing Oroonoko's true physical beauty so carefully and with such an emphasis, it seems as if the narrator feminises the male black prince. Furthermore, the narrative is filled with other gender reversals, both men having female characteristics as women acting like men, which will be thoroughly discussed in the following chapter.

Moreover, the description of Oroonoko's body is not only linked with gender issues, it is also interesting from a racial point of view. By using a black-skinned African prince as a main character, Behn breaks with the traditional association in literature which implied that black men were mainly depicted as villains or as shady people (Lipking 1996, 263). However, when reading the passage on Oroonoko's beauty, it is obvious that he is not like all the other blacks. The colour of his skin is not the same dark blackness most of the other Africans have, but it is described as a "perfect ebony". A black skin colour is the evident sign of racial difference. Since Oroonoko already differs in this particular feature, it is no surprise that all of his other characteristics as well are different from the ones "which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes" (Gallagher 241). Namely, he does not have a typical "African and flat" nose, but his is "rising and Roman". This particular description of Oroonoko's nose did evoke some strong reactions. As Hughes claims, some of the critiques saw it as "revealing Behn's racial insensitivity" (Hughes 212). But as he further explains, there were also black people who had "well-proportioned noses and European ideas of beauty", thus to condemn Behn of being

racial insensitive is perhaps a little rash (Hughes 213). Furthermore, also his mouth is not the natural mouth of a black person. He has fine shaped lips, opposed to the typical big African lips. Hence, Oroonoko cannot be described as a stereotypical black African and it can be assumed that his overwhelming physical beauty relates to the fact that he is more similar to whites than to blacks (Rosenthal 153). He can thus be described as a "classical European beauty", rather than as a natural black man. Brown even takes it one step further and claims that "in physical appearance, the narrator can barely distinguish her native prince from those of England" (Brown 186-17). However, Oroonoko is and remains an African prince, but he has adopted several European features, both externally as internally. This is what places him both inside and outside the African culture (Zangenehpour 91). He is a part of their group and culture, but it is because he is so different than the rest of the black men, that he stands out as an individual. Oroonoko's physical appearance and his great intellect is not the same as the body and the mind of the other 'natural' black men and for this reason, already from the beginning of his tale, the reader expects grand things from the black prince. Shaping the character Oroonoko with such care and precision, predicts the importance of this male figure.

#### 4.2. Imoinda

Opposed to the extensive and detailed portrayal the female narrator gives of Oroonoko's face and body, Imoinda's beauty is only described in one sentence when the reader first encounters her:

This old dead hero had only one daughter left of his race: a beauty that to describe her truly one need say only she was female to the noble male, the beautiful black Venus to our young Mars, as charming in her person as he and of delicate virtues. (Behn 12)

Surely, Imoinda is also one of the most beautiful creatures on earth, but compared to the description of Oroonoko's body, the information about her physical appearance does not contain the same details as the narrator provides to describe the black prince. Moreover, it seems as if Imoinda just serves as the female equivalent of the magnificent Oroonoko. No details are given about her nose, her lips, her hair etcetera. The reader entirely needs to rely on his or her imagination to form a vivid image of the beautiful woman, while this was not the case when reading Oroonoko's portrayal. Contrasted with the sentimental and idealizing characterization of this male character, I thought the narrator's description of Imoinda was rather disappointing. Again, similar to the interpretation of the lengthy and almost sexual report of Oroonoko's perfect body, this can be explained by the use of a female narrator. Of course, a woman undoubtedly pays more attention to the appearance of a handsome man than to the presentation of a rivalling beautiful woman. When the point of view shifts from the narrator to Oroonoko himself, an obvious change happens in the perception of the female character.

And indeed, when Oroonoko first meets his beloved one, we get a more comprehensive image of Imoinda, since the reader now sees her through the eyes of a man deeply falling in love with her, instead of the more detached view of the female narrator:

When he [Oroonoko] came, attended by all the young soldiers of any merit, he was infinitely surprised at the beauty of this fair queen of night, whose face and person was so exceeding all he had ever beheld, that lovely modesty with which she received him, that softness in her look and sighs upon the melancholy occasion of this honour that was done by so great a man as Oroonoko, and a prince of whom she had heard such admirable things, the awfulness wherewith she received him, and the sweetness of her words and behaviour while he stayed, gained a perfect conquest over his fierce heart and

made him feel the victor could be subdued. (Behn 13)

Compared to the first quotation regarding Imoinda's beauty, we do get some more information here, for instance the softness in her eyes is pointed out. When Oroonoko and Imoinda make a first acquaintance, Oroonoko is swept off his feet. As Gqola interprets this passage, he believes that Imoinda "is described here as possessing a beauty which disarms and conquers Oroonoko in a manner similar to the battles often said to be fought by the inhabitants of Coromantien. (...)" (Gqola 107-108). And in fact, this quote does contain some military terms, which you would not expect in a sentence that describes how two lovers meet for the first time. For instance the words 'conquest', 'fierce', 'victor' and 'subdued' remind us of a battlefield. Could it be that by using these terms, Behn implicitly connects Imoinda with the male world, the same way she links Oroonoko with feminine beauty through his sentimental physical description? Again, Behn plays with the roles of gender by reversing the traditional conceptions.

However, the description of Imoinda can also be received as sentimental. Her "lovely modesty", the "softness in her look", "the sweetness of her words and behaviour" all fit the traditional emotional role of women. Moreover, she is also seen as a "fair queen of night". Using the terms "fair" and "night" simultaneously creates a clear contrast, which would not go unnoticed in the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth century. According to Gqola, "the use of 'fair' evokes a recognisable writing tradition where the pale heroine or 'mistress' with pink cheeks is aesthetically pleasing by the standards of the day. The suggestion contained in 'Queen of the Night', however, undermines this standard of beauty through which Imoinda is defined. Her beauty is measured by way of contemporary English conceptions of beauty. The evocation of night alludes to the blackness of her skin" (Gqola 107-108). In those times, the European standard of beauty was characterised by a pale skin, pink cheeks and striking red lips. But since Imoinda is a black woman, she cannot measure up to these standards for white

women. By calling the African woman "a fair queen of night", Behn subverts the traditional norms. She equalises the beauty of the African female with the beauty of white Europeans. Although Imoinda is "queen of night", referring to her blackness, she is also "fair", which is an allusion to the pale English contemporary women. Hence, Imoinda's body does not only serve as an example of true African beauty, it is also a representation of European beauty.

Although it can be said that the black Imoinda is an illustration of the ideal white European woman, her body is also strongly linked with the African culture (Athey and Alarcon 416):

One may imagine then, we paid her a treble respect, and though, from her being carved in fine flowers and birds all over her body, we took her to be of quality before, yet when we knew Clemene was Imoinda we could not enough admire her. I had forget to tell you that those who are nobly born of that country are so delicately cut and razed all over the fore part of the trunk of their bodies, that it looks as if it were jappaned, the works being raised like highpoint round the edges of the flowers. (Behn 44)

She is covered with beautiful patterns and the "ethnic peculiarity lies in something which is superficially and externally done to the body, rather than something that is immanent in it" (Hughes 214). Her body serves as a symbol of her ethnic culture, as a consequence of what is added to it externally. She is not inherently connected with the African culture, it is only because of these superficial carvings that she is truly a part of her African heritage. These markings on her body symbolise her higher social position. Only privileged Africans were allowed to be decorated with carved flowers and birds. These tribal tattoos show how important someone is to the Coromantien society (Gqola 108). Usually, the decorative body markings were only used on noble female figures in the African nation (Athey and Alarcon 431). However, the narrator also shortly mentions a carved flower on Oroonoko's body:



"Some are only carved with a little flower or bird at the sides of the temples, as was Caesar" (Behn 44). Once again could this be received as a sign of Oroonoko's feminine side. Even though Oroonoko is a man, he too is decorated with a small female carving. But the little engraving on Oroonoko's body is nothing compared to Imoinda, who is entirely covered in patterns. The existence of the symbolic carvings on her skin is also much more emphasised in comparison with the brief comment about Oroonoko's small ornamental scarring. Because of her carved body, Imoinda is clearly still a traditional member of the African culture. Furthermore, it even suggests that the beautiful black woman is not as Europeanised as Oroonoko (Gqola 108).

Imoinda's beauty is also an important factor in the story, since it is not only the cause of her own downfall, it also leads to Oroonoko's self-destruction in the end. On the one hand, her delicate body causes conflict which ultimately results in her personal undoing. In Coromantien, she is the reason for a clash between Oroonoko and his grandfather, the king. They both desire to own the gorgeous Imoinda. The grandfather does possess her body after giving her the royal veil, but he fails to take possession of her sexually. Whereas Oroonoko does succeed to make love to her, but he is not able to make her his own since she already belongs to his royal and powerful grandfather (Rosenthal 153). This dispute eventually ends with the lovely Imoinda being sold as a slave and it therefore also causes her inevitable death to prevent her true beauty from falling into the hands of the white colonists. On the other hand, her fairness is also Oroonoko's downfall. He, as her husband, wants to protect her from the hard-handed white slave owners, who all desire to possess this beautiful creature. To make sure no other man but him will enjoy Imoinda's perfect body, Oroonoko forces himself to kill his wife (Hall 471). After understanding what he did and hence realizing that he lost his beautiful Imoinda, the emotional slave loses all his courage and strength, which ends in his cruel death by torture.

## 5. Gender Stereotypes and Gender Reversals

### 5.1. Oroonoko

As is already discussed in the previous chapter, Behn likes to play with the conventional gender roles and her characters often possess some qualities of the opposite sex. I already explained how the description of the physical body and its beauty differs from what would be expected from a traditional point of view. In this chapter, I further want to examine how the characters are depicted as men or as women. While reading the short novel, it is noticeable how gender stereotypes alternate with gender reversals, for instance Oroonoko is both characterised by manly actions as by his feminine features. When looking through Aphra Behn's oeuvre, it is noteworthy how her work is dominated by strong female protagonists (Goreau 285). Although both Imoinda and the female narrator play an important role in this short novel, as the title suggests, it is the male Oroonoko who is the centre of Behn's *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave*. Oroonoko is presented as a brave man, for instance by winning wars in Coromantien, by winning fights with enormous tigers in Surinam etcetera. The summary of his activities is only marked with actions that demonstrate Oroonoko's manliness, and not with deeds you would consider to be done by a woman. He fears nothing and he deliberately seeks danger to prove himself and to test his strength and power (Goreau 62):

He had a spirit all rough and fierce, and that could not be tamed to lazy rest; and though all endeavours were used to exercise himself in such actions and sports as this world afforded, as running, wrestling, pitching the bar, hunting and fishing, chasing and killing tigers of a monstrous size. (Behn 46)

These activities emphasise Oroonoko's masculinity and the strength he must have. The female narrator even believes that his force cannot be described as human:

He flew into the thickest of those that were pursuing his men, and being animated with despair, he fought as if he came on purpose to die, and did such things as will not be believed that human strength could perform, and such as soon inspired all the rest with new courage and new order. (Behn 31)

Even in a dangerous situation with no hope, Oroonoko is able to defend himself with a strength that is not possible to be possessed by a mortal man. With this quotation, the narrator characterises the male protagonist as a divine being. In addition to the fact, Dickson confirms Oroonoko's extraordinary existence: "in protecting Behn and other women from a wild tiger, indicates that Oroonoko is to be seen as a rebirth of royal precedent" (Dickson 584). To emphasise the supernaturalness of the African prince, the female author even compares him with the king of the animals: "It may be easily guessed in what manner the prince resented this indignity, who may be best resembled to a lion taken in a toil" (Behn 34). By equalizing Oroonoko with such a fearless and powerful animal, his strength and manliness predominates. His ultimate masculinity is eventually shown when he so quickly succeeds in impregnating Imoinda, which was the obvious task of a husband: "From that happy day, Caesar took Clemene for his wife (...) and in a very short time after, she conceived with child "(Behn 44). Because Oroonoko is able to consummate the marriage, he proves that he is worthy of being called a man and a husband.

Furthermore, to convince the reader of the character's masculinity, Oroonoko is also equalised with the brave and masculine Indian men. When in times of war a new military leader must be chosen, two competitors battle each other by cutting off their own noses, lips, ears, etcetera. Whoever carries on the self-mutilation the longest, wins the title of general (Harol 447):

They told us, by our interpreter, that when any war was waging, two men chosen out by some old captain, whose fighting was past, and who could only

teach the theory of war, these two men were to stand in competition for the generalship, or great war captain, and being brought before the old judges, now past labour, they are asked what they dare do to show they are worthy to lead an army. When he who is first asked, making no reply, cuts off his nose and throws it contemptibly on the ground, and the other does something to himself that he thinks surpasses him, and perhaps deprives himself of lips and an eye. So they slash on till one gives out, and many have died in this debate.

(Behn 55-56)

These men are so virile that they dare go as far as cutting off their own flesh. They are able to put aside their pain in order to win the honour of being war captain. They value their reputation and they do not even fear death, since they rather die than give up and lose the battle. These qualities are reflected in Oroonoko at the end of the novel, after he has killed his wife:

"Tis not life I seek, nor am I afraid of dying,' and at that word cut a piece of flesh from his own throat and threw it at 'em, 'yet still I would live if I could till I had perfected my revenge. But oh it cannot be, I feel life gliding from my eyes and heart, and if I make not haste, I shall yet fall a victim to the shameful whip.'. At that he ripped up his own belly, and took his bowels and pulled 'em out with what strength he could (Behn 70)

Equal to the Indian men, Oroonoko is not afraid to cut his own flesh. He does not seem to experience a lot of pain, since he is still able to address the others. Just as the Indians, he is not scared of death, as he explicitly shares with the English who all stand aside and watch him. He also thinks his reputation is of great importance, because he rather dies by his own hand, than to "fall a victim to the shameful whip". Even with his throat cut out, he is capable of speaking loud and clearly and eventually he still has enough strength left to pull out his

own bowels. In the end, Oroonoko goes down as a true man.

However, throughout the short novel, Oroonoko is also strongly feminised, as was already proven in the previous chapter by the description of his long hair, his female carving, etcetera. Even though the male protagonist is described as a courageous man, he also acts "like a long-suffering romance heroin", as Lori Humphrey Newcomb describes it (Newcomb 283). Thus aside from his masculine bravery, Oroonoko is also represented as a soft and sentimental man, which are typical womanlike qualities:

I have often heard him say that he admired by what strange inspiration he came to talk thing 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 13-14)

Oroonoko expresses his personal feelings with great detail and he is not afraid to show his sentimental side. He talks softly and passionately and even though he was not used to feminine conversation, he has no problem confessing his feelings in the "language of love". It almost seems as if this comes natural to the tender and passionate hearted prince, because an "until then unknown power instructed his heart and tongue". Oroonoko even admits that he likes the company of women more than being with men: "However, these conversations failed not altogether so well to divert him, that he liked the company of us women much above the men" (Behn 45). Furthermore, during the entire short story, Oroonoko more than once is caught by the reader being weak and devastated because of his unbearable heartache over his beloved Imoinda, for example "Then, at her name, grief would get the ascendant of rage, and he would lie down by her side, and water her face with showers of tears, which never went to fall from those eyes" (Behn 68). Not being able to stand up and having tears rolling down his

eyes, is not an image that suits a fierce warrior. Moreover, while Oroonoko does not even seem to feel pain when he cuts himself and when he is being dismembered and tortured to death, he however cannot bear the tormenting heartache when he fears to lose his lovely Imoinda: "While Oroonoko felt all the agonies of love, and suffered under a torment the most painful in the world" (Behn 18). This is not the behaviour you would expect from the brave Oroonoko who does not even fear a monstrous tiger, but it would rather be linked with a weak and fearful female figure. At the end of the novella, the feminization of the black protagonist reaches its climax, with Oroonoko being castrated during his fatal punishment and thus being completely and literally emasculated (Pearson 1991, 189).

## 5.2. Imoinda

Opposed to Oroonoko, who is both represented as courageous and sentimental, Imoinda is only characterised by her gender reversal. She does not act the way a traditional wife does. In fact, she stands by Oroonoko in a fight against the white slave owners:

His heroic Imoinda, who grown 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 61)

Although Imoinda is pregnant, which normally would be an indication of true womanhood, she joins her husband in a fight. She shows great courage and she has blindly trust in her leader (or in this case her husband), just as soldiers would do in war. She is very skilled with bow and arrow since she manages to wound several people, which is usually seen as a male symbol. According to Pearson, "One of Behn's simplest devices is to endow her female heroes

with male clothes, weapons, language, money, or other symbols of male power" (Pearson 1991, 181). The fact that Imoinda is able to deadly wound the governor with a manly weapon such as a poisoned arrow, can be seen as the climax of her masculinization. Opposed to the other slave wives who insist that their men must betray their leader and surrender themselves to the white colonists, the emphasis truly lies on Imoinda's gender reversal (Athey and Alarcon 423). Since the Renaissance believed words to be feminine and deeds to be masculine, the difference between the yelling slave women and the acting Imoinda is hereby also highlighted (Ferguson 223). Moreover, the active image of Imoinda holding bow and arrow does not only refer to men, it also resembles the image of other powerful female figures. As is explained by Lipking, African societies did not produce courageous female figures as Imoinda and therefore, Behn needed to find her inspiration to create this character elsewhere. It is said that the persona Imoinda is constructed from "an amalgam of earlier romance and epic characters" (Lipking 2004, 181). Hence, it could be that the strong female Amazons and the modest Indian maidens served as a model while creating Imoinda. When Oroonoko's actions require a powerful woman to help him, his wife is there to support him in combat with bow and arrow, resembling the one-breasted Amazons. However, when Oroonoko is in need of gentle care, Imoinda is nowhere to be seen. For example, after his brutal whipping, it is the white nurses who bring him back to health, instead of his beloved one (Lipking 2004, 181). Imoinda thus fails to complete the traditional tasks of a caring wife and is therefore again defeminised.

Her masculinity is also shown in the end, when the female warrior is about to die. When Oroonoko suggests that Imoinda must die by his hand, in order for him to complete his revenge without him worrying about his wife being collected by other men, Imoinda does not respond emotionally to his proposal, but she rationally embraces the fact that she has to die. Equal to a brave man or a courageous soldier, Imoinda is not afraid of death: "He [Oroonoko]

found the heroic wife faster pleading for death than he was to propose it" (Behn 67). While Oroonoko is depicted as a sentimental human being in this passage, Imoinda is a symbolisation of full-hearted selfless sacrifice. The African prince is devastated because he has to assassinate his lovely wife, whereas Imoinda only feels joy in the fact that she is being murdered by her honourable lover: "He (...) 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 67-68). The contrast between the facial expressions of the two lovers is a clear example of the contradiction between the passionate and emotional Oroonoko and the silent and brave Imoinda: while the former has tears rolling down his face, the latter leaves the physical world with an eternal smile covering her face.

### 5.3. Other Characters

Not only Oroonoko and Imoinda break the rules of traditional gender roles in the Renaissance, also other characters in the short novel cross the gender-based boundaries and thereby balancing themselves between contemporary and innovative conceptions of gender. Starting with the group of female black slaves, they were regularly viewed as in some way masculine. Slave owners paid per lot, so they could not choose the number of male or female slaves they acquired. If they were lucky, their lot contained a good number of strong male workers, but if fortune was not on their side, they could end up with a lot almost solely consisting of 'weak' women. Because the colonists had no control over the amount of male or female slaves they purchased, the tasks on the plantation were also not gender-based. The white owners did not make a distinction between male or female labour so black women had to undergo the same hardship as black men, working alongside each other and doing the same aggravating jobs (MacDonald 72). Nonetheless, Behn also uses the female slaves to symbolise the stereotypical



fearful and cowardly side of women. When their husbands join Oroonoko in his revolt against the slave owners, the wives do not hesitate a second to surrender when they are caught and they urge their husbands to do the same:

and the women and children seeing their husbands so treated, being of fearful, cowardly dispositions, and hearing the English cry out, 'Yield and live; yield and be pardoned!', they all run in amongst their husbands and fathers, and hung about 'em crying out, 'Yield, yield, and leave Caesar to their revenge' (Behn 61)

These women are not courageous at all. The acts of the male slaves come to an end because of the words of the female slaves. And indeed, in this passage, the contemporary assumption of male deeds and female words is confirmed, as is already explained. Thus female black slaves both possess manly and womanly qualities. They are hard workers and they do not differ from male slaves regarding work on the plantation, but they still remain fragile and cowardly women, who do not dare to stand up for themselves against the white owners.

Beside the group of female slaves, there are also some men in the story who, just like Oroonoko, sometimes behave in a more feminine way. A first example is the kind Trefry. As the African prince, the friendly Trefry can also be described as a loving, passionate man: "Trefry, who was naturally amorous, and loved to talk of love as well as anybody" (Behn 41). Talking about love, especially the love between Oroonoko and Imoinda, is one of his favourite subjects. Men are not supposed to talk about love and feelings, this is what women gossip about. Because he is so "naturally amorous", he acts in a more sentimental way than the other colonists at the plantation:

But Trefry and Byam pleaded and protested together so much, that Trefry, believing the governor to mean what he said, and speaking very cordially himself, generously put himself into Caesar's hands, and took him aside, and persuaded him, even with tears, to live by surrendering himself, and to name

his conditions. (Behn 63)

This quotation explicitly mentions how Trefry does not think rationally, but speaks from his heart. He is not ashamed to show his tears, if this helps to save Oroonoko. While reading the novel, I got the impression that Trefry's feelings towards Oroonoko can perhaps be interpreted as more than just friendship. Firstly, as is stated in previous passage, Trefry is in tears when he fears that Oroonoko may commit suicide during his rebellion, since the black slave indicates that he rather dies "than live upon the same earth with such dogs" (Behn 63). Thinking about losing Oroonoko, makes Trefry very emotional. A second reason to believe that there is more between the two men, is the fact that Trefry, although he officially owns Oroonoko, does not treat him as a slave. There is no mentioning of Oroonoko engaging himself in hard slave labour, like the rest of the blacks are forced to do on the plantation. Oroonoko even spends more time with the white colonists than with the members of his own African culture. Most of his time in Surinam is devoted to "gentlemanly adventures" (Visconsi 688). It seems as if Oroonoko is not a captive slave to Trefry, but that Trefry vice versa is captured in his admiration for the noble black prince: "The company laughed at his servility to a slave, and Caesar only applauded the nobleness of his passion and nature" (Behn 42). However, is this an act of nobleness or can this be interpreted as a sign of affection? A third and last reason to assume Trefry's love for Oroonoko, I feel, is the fact that he never obliges a female slave to become his mistress. The reason why Trefry never forced Imoinda is explained in a conversation between the two men:

'I do not wonder', replied the prince, 'that Clemene should refuse slaves, being as you say so beautiful, but wonder how she escapes those who can entertain her as you can do; or why, being your slave, you do not oblige her to yield.' 'I confess', said Trefry, 'when I have, against her will, entertained her with love so long as to be transported with my passion, even above decency, I have been

ready to make use of those advantages of strength and force nature has given me. But O, she disarms me with that modesty and weeping so tender, and so moving that I retire and thank my stars she overcame me.' (Behn 42)

Although Trefry claims that he could not force Imoinda to unwillingly surrender herself to her white owner because she was so moving and modest, this does not explain why he did not obligate another female slave to do so. Not being able to sexually possess a woman downgrades Trefry as a man. Perhaps he does not succeed in doing so, because he is not attracted to women this way. Nevertheless, the preceding quote also reaffirms Trefry's sentimental side. Only by tenderly looking into his eyes and depicting herself as a vulnerable woman, Imoinda is able to manipulate her white owner. Not only does she turn him down as a lover, she also manages to arouse a feeling of gratitude instead of anger. Real men would be aggravated if a woman rejected them, not thankful for having met her.

However, Trefry is not the only male character who cannot be presented as a real man. Already in the first part of the novel, which takes place in Oroonoko and Imoinda's home town Coromantien, there are some implied notifications that indicate a gender reversal. It starts with Oroonoko's grandfather. The most emphasised characteristic of the king is his age: "The king of Coromantien was himself a man of a hundred and odd years" (Behn 10), "On the other side, the old king, (...). At this character his old heart" (Behn 14-15), "as the king's old age" (Behn 17), "he was old and obstinate" (Behn 24), "his [Oroonoko] old grandfather" (Behn 25), "since the old king" (Behn 26), "the king being old" (Behn 28), etcetera. Keeping his age in mind, and the fact that he is not able to make love to Imoinda, although she legally is his to have since she received the royal veil, it suggest the impotency of the old king. It is nowhere explicitly mentioned in the novel, but his failure to sexually own the black beauty reappears several times, for example: "They urged all to him that might oppose his rage, but nothing weighed so greatly with him as the king's old age incapable of injuring him with

Imoinda" (Behn 17) and "but should depart satisfied in this, that since the old king had hitherto not been able to deprive him of those enjoyments which only belonged to him" (Behn 26). According to Pearson, "male impotence is a favourite Behn motif for defusing male power" (Pearson 1991, 182). Moreover, Oroonoko's grandfather is not only impotent sexually, but also militarily he is no longer able to satisfy his needs (Rosenthal 158): "So that he king being old, and not able to defend himself in war, and having no sons of all his race remaining alive" (Behn 28). Thus as well as in the bedroom as on the battlefield, the royal man has no power. Behn entirely deprived him of his manhood. If a man is no longer capable of sexually satisfying a woman (and himself) and if he also lost all his strength and power, how is he still different from a woman? Maybe by taking away the prominent male qualities, Behn tries to reverse his gender.

In addition to the old royal king, there is also another male character in Coromantien who has to cope with a loss of male power. Opposed to the king, whose age in particular is responsible for his lack of power, Aboan deprivation of control over his own body is caused by a woman. Aboan is the faithful friend of Oroonoko, who helps the African prince to enter the Otan to meet with Imoinda, after she has been taken by the king. The Otan was "the palace of the king's women" where all his mistresses were gathered and therefore, it was heavily guarded (Behn 17). The two friends plan to enter this harem and to retrieve Imoinda from the hands of the old king. In order for them to enter these walls, they needed help from within. The necessary aid was provided by Onahal, an old wife of Oroonoko's grandfather who was in charge of Imoinda. Whenever a mistress got too old and hence when her beauty passed away and she was no longer of use as a concubine, she became the guardian of the new and younger girls who entered the Otan. Thus, it can be said that once you entered the Otan as a mistress, you never left it. But this also meant that Onahal was a woman with power in the Otan. In exchange for her help, Aboan sacrifices himself and agrees on being Onahal's lover: "he

[Aboan] suffered himself to be caressed in bed by Onahal" (Behn 25). The way this is reported, emphasises the unwillingness of Aboan and it reminded me of how rape would be described. Thus by agreeing to Onahal's conditions, Aboan loses the control over his own body. However, exchanging your body in return for a favour is not that common with men. Usually, women are the ones who undergo the shame of selling their own bodies and men are the ones who propose such actions, which means that the roles are reversed in this situation. Moreover, Aboan is also deprived of his male dominance:

she [Onahal] took from her ears two large pearls and commanded him [Aboan] to wear 'em in his. (...) But forcing the pearls into his hand, she whispered softly to him, 'O do not fear a woman's invention when love sets her a-thinking'" (Behn 23)

Not only does Onahal take possession of Aboan's body, she even commands him to wear her earrings. By doing so, Aboan cross-dresses himself as a woman and thereby completely loses his masculinity. Furthermore, it is the duty of a wife to obey her husband when he gives her a command. Because Onahal is so assertive and because Aboan accepts her dominance, the traditional roles reverse and the male character becomes the wife in this picture, while the female figure acts as the ruling husband.

A final example of gender reversal occurs when Oroonoko guides a group of English to visit the Indians. During that time, white people feared the Indians, since the native Indians and the intruding English lived in a feud: "About this time we were in many mortal fears about some disputes the English had with the Indians" (Behn 52). The natives were not considered as civil as the white people because they prosecuted some brutal practices, for instance they cut a man and nailed his parts to a tree. Nonetheless, the female narrator and her company insist on visiting these people. While the other English men and women are afraid of them, the narrator shows some manly courage by visiting an Indian town. She is first

accompanied by a group of eighteen people, but not all of them persevere out of fear. Eventually only Oroonoko, her brother, her "woman, a maid of good courage" and a fisherman who knew the language are left (Pearson 1991, 186). The narrator and her woman show great courage because while the others waited in the bushes, they approached the town. When the Indians first noticed them "they set up a loud cry" (Behn 53). Even though the narrator was frightened at first, she kept her position and she did not run away. Moreover, when the natives stand still, it is the female narrator who dares to approach them and offers them her hand. When she describes how she appeared to the natives, she states that her "own hair was cut short" (Behn 53). While reading this passage, this seemed odd to me because women are usually characterised by their long and flowing hair. But especially in comparison with the description of Oroonoko's first appearance, I thought this was a noteworthy detail. Whereas the male African prince had long and well-groomed hair, the picture of the female narrator with short hair is the complete opposite. Why would Behn include this detail? The fact that it is explicitly mentioned, points out its importance. Besides, even when Imoinda's physical beauty is described (a passage where the comment on female hairstyle would have been more in its place), there is no reference to her hair being short or long. But in this specific quotation, where the emphasis lies on the richness of the clothes of the English, Behn adds this irrelevant peculiarity which, I believe, makes it even more stand out. It maybe suggests how the narrator in this moment resembles a man. She is being brave by daring to go visit the Indians, thus a manly presentation is appropriate here. This quote shows how even in the small details, Behn is capable of criticizing the traditional gender roles in her society.

## 6. The Social Aspect: Women as Property

### 6.1. Through Marriage

Although the short novel is highly characterised by gender reversals and strong females, women were still subordinates in African and colonial marriages. During Behn's lifetime, marriage was a necessary commitment. Without a husband, English women could not survive because they needed financial support. Hence, money and fortune were the most common reasons for contemporary English women to engage themselves in marriage. However, the setting of the novel is quite different from the setting of contemporary Britain and therefore, other marital reasons emerge. The most important reason in the novel for two people to get married is the obvious one: love. However, in the African and Indian culture, marriage to a beautiful woman was also a symbol of status. That is why so many men attempt to possess Imoinda. However, both nuptials out of love or out of social status result in women being treated as a possession. Throughout the short novel, the concept of marriage is three times described. Each understanding of matrimony is linked to a different region: first the Indian towns, then Coromantien and lastly Surinam. They are all used as a critique on the inferior role of women in marriage, one more explicitly than the other. Firstly, the narrator sketches how marriages are defined within the group of native Indians:

They have plurality of wives, which, when they grow old, they serve those that succeed' em, who are young, but with a servitude easy and respected, and unless they take slaves in war, they have no other attendants. (Behn 8)

Men are not bound to one woman. The Indians practice polygamy, which means that they can legally have multiple wives. Whenever a female gets too old, she is no longer capable of completing the task of a good wife, which meant she could not satisfy her husband's every

needs any longer so she gets replaced. However, when a wife loses her sexual value to a man, she does not lose his respect. A man is to take care of his wives till they die. After a woman fulfilled her marital duties, she stays under the protection of her husband, whose main task it is to provide security for his wives. These women are also somehow equalised with slaves. They serve as attendants and they are compared to the slaves that are taken in war. This could relate to the fact that once a woman was bound to a man, she belonged to him and became his property. She has no choice but to stay with her husband. Though marriage is described as something women cannot get out of, Behn also points out that it is still an action of love:

Not but I have seen a handsome young Indian dying for love of a very beautiful young Indian maid; but all his courtship was to fold his arms, pursue her with his eyes, and sighs were all his language, while she, as if no such lover were present, or rather, as if she desired none such, carefully guarded her eyes from beholding him, and never approached him, but she looked down with all the blushing modesty I have seen in the most severe and cautious of our world.

(Behn 8)

It describes the passion and love between two young Indians. Even though Indians are allowed to have multiple unions in marriage, they still act from a place called love. This quote can relate to young sentimentality, but it also shows how pure the Indian love is. To seduce a woman, all the young Indian can do is innocently "pursue her with his eyes" and using sighs to express how he feels. The girl is not to surrender herself immediately to the man and she needs to guard herself. However, only by secretly blushing, she reveals her true feelings. It shows how Indian men are not able to just take possession of their wives. They still have to pursue their female companions and it has to be with mutual consent. Their openness for affection towards multiple women is also shown when the female narrator and her party visit the Indian town: "This young Peeie had a very young wife, who seeing my brother kiss her,



came running and kissed me; after this, they kissed one another, and made it a very great jest" (Behn 55). They do not seem to be known with the concept of jealousy. Although they are not familiar with the idea of kissing, it is obvious that this is an affectionate deed. By innocently starting to kiss other women, they show how open-minded they are. The Indians also guiltlessly feel the breasts of the white women, which indicates that they are not familiar with the conventional English boundaries:

and from gazing upon us round, they touched us, laying their hands upon all the features of our faces, feeling our breasts and arms, taking up one petticoat, then wondering to see another; admiring our shoes and stockings, but more our garters (Behn 53)

The fact that they are unaware of any wrongdoing, proves how it is common in their culture to admire each other's sexual bodies and it also shows that the male Indians do not consider the (femal) body to be something personal. Whenever they set their mind to it, they can unsolicited palpate the bodies of strange women, which emphasises the notion of women and their bodies being seen as property.

The second definition of marriage is linked to the marital traditions in Coromantien and specifically to the unusual case of Oroonoko and Imoinda's matrimony. The love between these two blacks goes against the norms of the culture in Coromantien, since the men in the African country, just as the Indians, practice polygamy (Rosenthal 158):

(...) and especially in that country, where men take to themselves as many as they can maintain and where the only crime and sin with woman is to turn her off, to abandon her to want, shame, and misery (Behn 14)

So basically, a man is allowed to take as many wives as he can afford and he can do anything to them, but to abandon them. Once they are united through marriage, it is the duty of the man to support his wives till they die. However, this conception of marriage does not suit the

passionate feelings of Oroonoko. He believes Imoinda to be his one and true love and therefore he is not willing to share his affection with any other women.

(...) so he made her such propositions as were not only and barely such but, contrary to the custom of this country, he made her vows she should be the only woman he would possess while he lived, that no age or wrinkles should incline him to change (Behn 14)

As a man in Coromantien, Oroonoko is not obliged to be with one and the same woman for the rest of his life. It is his choice and it again represents his romantic sensibility. However, in this quotation, Oroonoko explicitly indicates how married women become a property to their husbands with the words "she should be the only woman he would *possess* while he lived" (emphasis added). Even though the union between Oroonoko and Imoinda is based on mutual love, he still describes her as being in his possession. With the promise Oroonoko makes that Imoinda will be his property until they die and that he will never own another woman but her, a marital bonding is sort of established between the two lovers.

Yet, Imoinda cannot be officially possessed by Oroonoko until he makes the marriage legal and gets the approval of his grandfather:

There is a certain ceremony in these cases to be observed, (...); but 'twas concluded on both sides that, in obedience to him, the grandfather was to be first made acquainted with the design, for they pay a most absolute resignation to the monarch, especially when he is parent also. (Behn 14)

The lifelong union between Oroonoko and his love is thus dependent on the consent of the king. However, Oroonoko's grandfather has already heard the rumours about the true beauty of Imoinda. Even though he is familiar with Oroonoko's passionate attachment to the gorgeous black female, the old king uses his royal power to conquer Imoinda before Oroonoko is able to. This means that in the African culture, women could not only be claimed

by marriage, they could also be commandeered as royal property. Since Oroonoko has not yet claimed Imoinda by consummating their established marriage, the king is still able to make her his royal mistress:

This gave the old king some affliction, but he salved it with this: that the obedience the people pay their king was not at all inferior to what they paid their gods, and what love would not oblige Imoinda to do, duty would compel her to. He was therefore no sooner got to his apartment but he sent the royal veil to Imoinda; that is, the ceremony of invitation: (...) she was obliged to suffer herself to be covered and led away. (...) The king, without more courtship, bade her throw off her mantle and come to his arms. (...) but as by the laws he could not, and from his royal goodness would not, take from any man his wedded wife, so she believed she should be the occasion of making him commit a great sin, if she did not reveal her state and condition, and tell him she was another's, and could not be so happy to be his. (Behn 15-16)

This quote indicates that there were laws which limited the sexual power of a king. A monarch was not allowed to deduct a wedded wife from her legal husband, because this was considered to be a great sin. Imoinda is not yet lawfully taken by Oroonoko because they did not ask for the grandfather's permission yet. Therefore, the royal king is permitted to command her to "deny this marriage, and swear thyself a maid" and thereby making her his own property (Behn 16). Moreover, what love could not oblige her to do, duty would force her to. Because the king had the power to prevent Oroonoko from legally marrying Imoinda, she had no choice but to undergo her royal enslavement and to "oblige to suffer herself". Eventually, the king's ultimate possession of Imoinda is stressed when he sells her as a common slave after she is deflowered by his grandson and thus is nothing more to him than a "polluted thing" (Behn 27). Moreover, it is interesting to notice how Imoinda is double enslaved in the

narrative: firstly, she is made property of the royal king through his power to deny a marriage and secondly, in Surinam she is possessed by her husband and by the white slave holders: "They soon informed each other of their fortunes (...) while they could be so happy to *possess* each other" (Behn 43, emphasis added). In the first situation, Imoinda is depicted as a "fantastic Eastern female", while she is seen as the "ideal English wife" within the setting of her marriage to Oroonoko and the slave trade (Todd 128).

The third type of marriage that is brought to the reader's attention is the one between the black slaves, who live in captivity in Surinam. Opposed to the marriages in Coromantien and in Indian towns, it is nowhere mentioned that black slaves are allowed to have multiples wives on the plantation. The marital union between the slaves is characterised by the total obedience which the females pay to their husbands: "The wives, who pay an entire obedience to their husbands, obeyed, and stayed for 'em where they were appointed" (Behn 60). The male figure is still the dominant one in marriage and the wives have to do what they are told to. The obedience of women towards their men comes along with the respect they have for them:

for wives have a respect for their husbands equal to what any other people pay a deity, and when a man finds any occasion to quit his wife, if he love her, she dies by his hand, if not, he sells her or suffers some other to kill her (Behn 68)

Women regard their husbands as a deity, which means that men are considered to be higher ranked than their wives. People who respect a divinity, look up to this divine figure and they never show doubt towards it. Likewise do women blindly follow their husbands, without doubting their men's actions or their commands. In exchange for their female obedience, the wives receive support and protection from their spouses, for example "But as soon as Caesar found he was pursued, he put himself in a posture of defence, placing all the women and children in the rear" (Behn 61). During the rebellion, women and children are placed in the

back, behind the men so that the male characters can protect their family and the 'weaker' gender cannot be hurt. The sole reason for a husband to physically or emotionally hurt his woman is to sell or kill her whenever he "finds any occasion to quit his wife". An example of this is given, when Oroonoko gives his speech on humanity and when he calls his fellow manly slaves to rebel with him against the white slave owners:

But if there were a woman among them so degenerate from love and virtue to choose slavery before the pursuit of her husband, and with the hazard of her life, to share with him in his fortunes, that such an one ought to be abandoned and left as a prey to the common enemy (Behn 59)

If a slave wife dared to disobey her husband and defy him by choosing slavery over his decision to fight for freedom, she was no longer worthy to be called his wife and she should be punished by being abandoned by every other slave. She should be "left as a prey to the common enemy", either to be killed or to be raped. However, these severe expressions were only to warn the women. The black slaves also had a soft spot and their family was very important to them:

But O, consider, we are husbands and parents too, and have things more dear to us than life; our wives and children, unfit for travel in these unpassable woods, mountains and bogs (...) that as no man would pretend to that without all the acts of virtue, compassion, charity, love, justice, and reason, he found it not inconsistent with that to take an equal care of their wives and children, as they would of themselves, and that he did not design, when he led them to freedom and glorious liberty, that they should leave that better part of themselves to perish by the hand of the tyrant's whip. (Behn 58-59)

Their wives are more dear to them than life itself. They are described as the better part of the black men and it is self-evident to the slave husbands that they should take equal care of their

wives as they would of themselves. This description of the marital bond between black slaves does not evoke the traditional picture of women being treated as property. The black men have respect for their wives and the women are treated with care. Although the slave wives see their spouses as a deity and though they have to obey their husbands, there is also room for the women's own opinion. While women in marriage are supposed to be silent and cannot interfere with their husbands' actions, the black male slaves do listen to their beloved espouses when they beg them to turn their backs on Oroonoko and surrender themselves during the rebellion. With this request, the wives do choose slavery above their men's choice to fight for freedom. However, in contrast to what was suggested in the earlier quote, the female slaves are not abandoned and left for the enemy. As a matter of fact, instead of punishing their women for disobeying, the husbands yield to their wives' prayers. Although black women are often being mistreated by white slave owners, it seems as if they are being handled with care within their homes.

## 6.2 Through Slavery

Opposed to the way female slaves are treated by their husbands, their fate as a property of a white slave owner was much less fortunate. The fundamental aspect of slavery is that, whenever a woman (or a child or a man as well) is sold into slavery, she is deprived of any personal rights over her body (Mallipeddi 476). Slave owners can choose whatever they want to do with them: they can make them do hard labour on the plantation or they can force them to sexually satisfy their needs and thus becoming their mistresses. The feminine slaves were not able to defend themselves since they lost all their rights and therefore they were not allowed to refuse anything. The black women knew that if they dared to protest or reject their owner's wishes, punishment was undoubtedly a much more terrifying option:

if he should do this deed and die, either in the attempt or after it, he left his lovely Imoinda a prey or, at best, a slave to the enraged multitude. His great heart could not endure that thought. 'Perhaps', said he, 'she may be first ravished by every brute, exposed first to their nasty lusts, and then a shameful death' (Behn 67)

In many situations, death was preferred over a cruel punishment. Instead of being brutally raped by multiple men and shamefully murdered for her disobedience towards the white plantation owners, Imoinda chooses a more noble death because she knows what awaits her if she returns to her owner. For these reasons, slavery was considered to be worse than death and that is why Oroonoko's grandfather "sold her [Imoinda] like a common slave, the greatest revenge and the most disgraceful of any, and to which they a thousand times prefer death" (Behn 28). To fully revenge on Oroonoko, his grandfather sells Imoinda as a slave and thereby also sells the rights over her body. The fact that the king is allowed to do this, means that even in Coromantien, Imoinda already had no power over her own body. She is a captive of the old royal and if he is not able to sexually possess her, then he will make sure that neither Oroonoko is capable to do so. Because once sold as a slave, there was no way back.

Thus these black people had no prospect of a free and happier life, like they used to have before they became slaves. Their doom was also passed to their children. As Lipking states, "Like the parents, slave children were classified as chattel or real property, essentially as they would be if they were crops or livestock" (Lipking 2004, 175). The burden of being a property was passed on to every future child of a slave. They were not even considered human. They were equalised with crops or livestock, because all that was raised by slaves, both children and breed on the plantation, legally belonged to their white owner: "and that they would delay him [Oroonoko] till the time of his wife's delivery, and make a slave of that too, for all the breed is theirs to whom the parents belong" (Behn 45).

Although Imoinda is also forced to give up her future child as a slave, she is not in the same situation as the other female slaves on the plantation. Contrarily to them, Imoinda is in the advantage because she is able to refuse her suitors: "'For so,' said he, 'we have christened her. But she denies us all with such a noble disdain, that 'tis a miracle to see that she, who can give such eternal desires, should herself be all ice and unconcerned'" (Behn 41). She is desired by every man in the country, but not one of them succeeds in making her his property. No one even thinks about violently taking her in his possession. The kind Trefry for example, as is already discussed, does not impose himself on her, since he respects her feelings and he will not oblige her to answer his loving desires against her own will:

'I do not wonder', replied the prince, 'that Clemene should refuse slaves, being as you say so beautiful, but wonder how she escapes those who can entertain her as you can do; or why, being your slave, you do not oblige her to yield.'  
(Behn 42)

I reused part of this quotation because it reports how the female slave has the possibility to both refuse the allurements of others slaves as the obligations she has towards her legal owner. Thus, even though a woman becomes the property of a white man after being sold as a slave, she however is not consequently obligated to also yield to every slave who wants to possess her. She may have lost all the rights over her body to the slave owner, she does maintain some rights within the African community on the plantation.

A last example of a woman being enslaved does however not involve the oppression of an African female, but it shows how the Indians also suffer from slavery. Although the female narrator tells the reader that Indian people are "very useful to us" and that the English "find it absolutely necessary to caress 'em as friends and not to treat 'em as slaves; nor dare we do other, their numbers so far surpassing ours in that continent", it is nonetheless also described how governor Byam did take an Indian woman to be his mistress. After he is wounded by



Imoinda's poisoned arrow, it is his Indian wife who saves his life:

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 from the venom. (Behn 61)

This is the only annotation in the novel that specifically mentions the Indian slave (Athey and Alarcon 427). She belongs to the governor and I found it interesting that Byam took his mistress with him when he went to retrieve the rebellions in the woods. In this passage, she is made a sexual slave in two ways. Firstly, the narrator explicitly describes her as "his mistress" and secondly, the nature of Byam's healing process is also a strongly sexual deed. She sucked his wound, which is not only humiliating it is also a sexual reference. Remarkably, the relationship between the white governor and his native slave "is the only interracial sexual liaison which the novel permits" (Athey and Alarcon 427). Critics Athey and Alarcon also state that "in the battle scene between Imoinda and the Indian mistress, Behn not only represents the Amerindian-English-African trade as an exchange among individuals but also rewrites English economic exploitation and dependence in gendered terms. Furthermore, the gender distinctions separate women from each other as well as from men. While the 'Mistress' and Imoinda are opposed, they are both present as active and material bodies with the capacity to reproduce or sabotage colonial relationships" (Athey and Alarcon 427). By opposing the Indian mistress with Imoinda, Behn emphasises the "exploitation and dependence" of women. Both female slaves are dependent of their 'master'. In the first case, the Indian woman depends on her owner, while on the other hand Imoinda is subordinate to her husband. However, with both characters does Behn comment on colonial relationships.

### 6.3. Powerful versus Powerless Women

The fact that Aphra Behn's oeuvre mostly centres around strong female characters is already established in this paper. However, her fictional work is characterised by the presence of both "exaggeratedly powerful and exaggeratedly powerless woman and she manipulates both images to allow her narrators to explore, and criticise, the conditions which they and their female creator share" (Pearson 1991, 179). The struggle to cope with male authority and the ongoing battle to establish female power is a distinctive item in *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave*. The alternation between powerful and powerless women is best demonstrated within one and the same character: the female narrator. As the daughter of a deceased lieutenant general, the narrator believes she has some power over the men on this continent. She truly thinks she can help Oroonoko and Imoinda in their search for freedom. As a woman with temporary power in the colony, she is convinced she can argue with the white and mighty slave owners about an eventual release from slavery for Oroonoko, his wife and their future child. Moreover, she is also confident about the fact that she will succeed in doing so and that the colonists will listen to what the English woman has to say (Richards 673). However, even though the female figure is strongly convinced about her influence on the white imperialists, she fails to execute her alleged power.

Although the narrator feels as if she has power in Surinam, she is absent on the two crucial moments when she could have used it (Pearson 1991, 187). Firstly, when Oroonoko is brutally whipped, she is not present because she and her female companions fled "down the river to be secured, and while we were away they acted this cruelty" (Behn 64). If the female narrator was so powerful, why would she run when things were about to escalate? They are afraid that Oroonoko and his fellow slaves will cut their throats during their uprising, but why would they fear him if they have only treated him with respect, what cannot be said of

governor Byam. The narrator truly believes that if she had stayed, she would have been able to use her authority and prevent Oroonoko from being tortured:

For I suppose I had authority and interest enough there, had I suspected any such thing, to have prevented it, but we had not gone many leagues but the news overtook us that Caesar was taken, and whipped like a common slave" (Behn 64)

When the black slave mostly needed her and her power, she is as useful as any other powerless woman since she was too afraid to stay and help him. The second time the narrator fails to provide help to the African prince, is when he is executed and tortured to death at the end of the novel. He is in the presence of the narrator's mother and sister and because Behn is on a three day journey, she cannot be present when his dismemberment takes places. Again, she does not succeed in exercising her power in order to stop Oroonoko's mistreatment. Although she has power as a narrator and the right to practice a politic authority in the fictional world, she is unable to use this to her advantage to help the heroic Oroonoko in the real world (Pearson 1991, 187). The helplessness of the female narrator is often attributed to her femininity. When Oroonoko's ultimate downfall eventually happens, all female characters are powerless. Behn is useless because she is unable to be present at his execution. But even her mother and her sister who are attending his final torture are only helpless bystanders (Lipking 2004, 179). According to Todd, "The female narrator is powerful as a white imperialist and narrator but powerless as a woman". He also points out that "Pearson also notes the culturally constructed fear of female power that she sees caught in the Freudian slip about the sex of the American tiger, which is female when aggressive, male when defeated." (Todd 121). The lack of female power of the narrator and her feminine family members is contradicted with the power of the female tiger and female Nature. It suggests how the fear of female power is culturally constructed. The tiger is to be feared when she is feminine, but on

the contrary, the power of the female characters in the novel is not frightening at all.

#### 6.4. Imoinda versus Narrator

The two most striking female characters in the narrative are Imoinda and the narrator Aphra Behn. It is as if they compete with each other for Oroonoko's body and power and they both long to produce something that will change their future. While Imoinda wins this battle on short term by carrying Oroonoko's love child, the female narrator creates a 'literary' child by composing the short novel, which ultimately brings Oroonoko and his story eternal glory (Ferguson 221). The nature of the relationship between the African prince and these two prominent female characters is widely divergent. Oroonoko and Imoinda are bound through a physical love, and their erotic connection is proven by the impregnation and thus by the existence of their love child. The relationship between Oroonoko and the female narrator on the other hand is based on a rational and literary level:

So that obliging him to love us very well, we had all the liberty of speech with him, especially myself, whom he called his great mistress; and indeed my word would go a great way with him." (Behn 45)

Oroonoko calls Behn his "great mistress" and the quote also states how her words would survive their existence. The significance of the term "great mistress" can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, there is the obvious meaning of the word. When one thinks of a mistress, the erotic picture of a paramour immediately pops to mind. However, another reading of the term "mistress" is also possible and this can be an indication of Behn's higher rank and snobbery (Rosenthal 163). "Mistress" is also a term of female power and keeping in mind the struggle of the female narrator to establish her power in the colony, this reading may be more plausible. As Erickson described it, "Mistress was one of the few female words of power in

this era" (Erickson 202-203). When looking up the term in the Oxford English Dictionary, his statement is confirmed. The first definitions all relate to a woman in control of power, for example: "the female head of a family, household, or other establishment; a woman holding such a position in conjunction with a male counterpart" or "a woman who employs others in her service; a woman who has authority over servants, attendants, or slaves". The first paraphrase of the term emphasises the fact that a woman is never solely in control, she is always associated with a male match. In the case of the narrator, the position of the male opponent can be credited to Oroonoko. The other clarification of the word 'mistress' points out the authority women can have over slaves. In the case of this anti-slavery narrative, I believed this definition to be the most accurate. By calling the narrator "his great mistress", Oroonoko thus enounces the authority she has over him. Thus while Oroonoko as Imoinda's husband has power over her, the female narrator has authority over this black slave because of her position in high society.

Thus the two main female characters in the short novel are placed opposite to each other. They both choose to encourage Oroonoko in a different way. While Imoinda explicitly supports Oroonoko by physically joining him in his fight, the narrator depends on her colonial power and her literary skills to help her slave-hero (Gqola 112). Imoinda is considered powerful since she plays an active role in Oroonoko's fight for freedom, opposed to Behn who is only able to use her power to retell the story afterwards (MacDonald 77). Imoinda thus succeeds her task of obedient and supportive wife, but the narrator fails to act as a powerful female figure. Although the women both are not present to support Oroonoko during his punishment, they have divergent excuses. The narrator choice to remove herself from the scene and flee while things got serious, while Imoinda had not no other option because she was carried away by the white men to prevent her from miscarrying or from dying at the sight of her beloved one being to brutally martyre: "for fear she should die with the sight, or

miscarry, and then they should lose a young slave, and perhaps the mother" (Behn 64, MacDonald 76).

Imoinda and Behn also differ in the way they are presented in the narrative. While Imoinda is almost exclusively defined through her body, the narrator contrarily was characterised by her literary voice. The language of the female slave was only bodily: she speaks with her eyes and she "was caught in eye contact, dance, and stumbling, as well as in submission to Oroonoko's knife" (Todd 128). Hence, Imoinda was depicted as a voiceless, but active woman, whereas the narrator's most powerful feature was her strong voice. It is due to her association with the voice, that Behn's power outlives Imoinda's.

## 7. Male versus Female

### 7.1. In Society

After thoroughly examining the position of woman in society and slavery, I now briefly want to contrast how the male and female characters are different or equal to one another. Firstly by commenting on their traditional view in society and secondly by discussing their role in slavery. Since most of the story takes place within the setting of enslavement and since race is so closely linked with gender, I can only briefly discuss the general traditional gender roles of society that are being illustrated in the novel. As is already explained in the previous chapter, the power of men was much more stabilised than female power. Even though the narrator is of high class, she cannot rise against the white imperialists. When she has fled during Oroonoko's mutiny, it is the slave's male white friend, Trefry, who at first is able to persuade governor Byam to pardon Oroonoko. It is only when the governor gets rid of Trefry with a pretended business affair and thus removing his real obstacle, that he can execute his plans to finish the African prince. This indicates the dominance and the persistence of male power over feminine power in the colonial society.

Another typical manly aspect is his physical strength in comparison with the weakness of women. When Oroonoko's fishing adventure is reported, the narrator tells about a specific numb-eel that has the potential to deprive anyone who touches it with his fishing rod of all his senses. Many of them were not able to retell this event, since this often led to death by drowning:

though with a line of never so great a length with a rod at the end of it, it shall, in the same minute the bait is touched by this eel, seize *him or her* that holds the rod with benumbedness, that shall deprive 'em of sense for a while

(...).Caesar used to laugh at this, and believed it impossible *a man* could lose his force at the touch of a fish (Behn 51, emphasis added)

It is remarkable how the narrator first addresses the victim with the pronouns 'him' and 'her', which explicitly indicates both a female and a male sufferer and subsequently add that it was "impossible a man", thus only referring to the male race, "could lose his force at the touch of a fish". Thus by shifting from pronouns for both sexes to a solely reference to the masculine breed, Behn suggests that it was common for women to lose their force against something as ordinary as a fish, but that it was unseen and extraordinary for a man to lose a fight with an plain eel.

## 7.2. In Slavery

Opposed to the difference between men and women regarding their strength in society, both groups were equal when it came to hard labour in slavery, as I already fully explained. The equality in slavery does not only relate to gender, it also occurs for other features: "the twenty pounds paid, then, is for a 'black' person, regardless of any physical characteristic. Gender, age, strength, size, beauty were all indifferent." (Gallagher 246). All slaves are worth the same amount because a slave holder paid twenty pounds per head for every lot, regardless what types of blacks the lot contained: weak or strong, male or female, young or old, healthy or unhealthy, etcetera:

Those who want slaves make a bargain with a master, or captain of a ship and contract to pay him so much a piece, a matter of twenty pound a head for as many as he agrees for and to pay for 'em when they shall be delivered on such a plantation. So that when there arrives a ship laden with slaves, they who have so contracted go aboard and receive their number by lot; and perhaps in one lot



may be for ten, there may happen to be three or four men, the rest, women and children. (Behn 9)

Moreover, whether they were married, a mother or a father, or just a single African, all black people were separated after they were captured and treated the same way:

and having put 'em, some in one, and some in other lots with women and children (which they call piccaninnies), they sold 'em off as slaves to several merchants and gentlemen, not putting any two in one lot, because they would separate 'em far from each other, not daring to trust 'em together (Behn 37)

These examples indicate how slave trade is characterised by an equality of people. The moment slaves were sold, their gender did not matter. However, it was after they arrived at their plantation that the owners began to distinguish male slaves from female slaves.

The difference between sexes in slavery is noticeable after the rebellion against the white slave holders. During the uprising, both Oroonoko and Imoinda stand out for playing an active role in the fight for freedom. Oroonoko is the leader of the other black slaves and he is the one who placed the idea of a mutiny in their heads. Imoinda actively joins his side by wounding the governor with a poisoned arrow, which almost led to his death. To me, Imoinda's deed seems at least equally severe to the colonists as Oroonoko's disobedience, but this is not reflected in the way the two slaves are punished. Although Imoinda nearly killed the white men's leader, her punishment is not proportional to the one Oroonoko gets:

When they thought they were sufficiently revenged on him, they untied him, almost fainting with loss of blood from a thousand wounds all over his body, from which they had rent his clothes, and led him bleeding and naked as he was, and loaded him all over with irons, and then rubbed his wounds, to complete their cruelty, with Indian pepper. (...) They spared Imoinda, and did not let her see this barbarity committed towards her lord, but carried her down

to Parham, and shut her up, which was not in kindness to her, but for fear she should die with the sight, or miscarry, and then should lose a young slave, and perhaps the mother. (Behn 63-64)

In this quotation, Behn clearly opposes the punishment of the male and the female slave. While Oroonoko is only being punished for being resistant and for trying to revenge himself on the white slave holders, there is no suggestion at all that Imoinda receives a punishment for injuring white colonists and even worse, for deadly wounding the governor. It is only stated that there is regret that he did not die (Lipking 1996, 276). Contrasted with the torture Oroonoko suffers of being whipped till his body counts thousands of wounds and thereafter being rubbed with Indian pepper to make sure the flesh wounds burn and causing Oroonoko to experience his pain to the fullest, Imoinda is spared from both physical and emotional torture by being carried away from the scene. The narrator explains the mildness of Imoinda's treatment to the fact that the black woman was pregnant and that the slave owners were more interested in saving a future slave than in punishing Imoinda for her deeds. However, we cannot be sure that Imoinda would have been treated the same way if she was not expecting a child, since there is no other reference to a disobeying woman who needs to be punished to compare Imoinda's situation to.

Apart from gender equalities and differences in slavery, I briefly want to include the racial difference Oroonoko explicitly criticises during his speech to his fellow black slaves, since race and gender are so strongly connected according to some critics:

Caesar, having singled out these men from the women and children, made an harangue to 'em of the miseries and ignominies of slavery, counting up all their toils and sufferings under such loads, burdens, and drudgeries as were fitter for beasts than men, senseless brutes than human souls. He told 'em it was not for days, months or years, but for eternity; there was no end to be of their

misfortunes. They suffered not like men who might find a glory and fortitude in oppression, but like dogs that loved the whip and bell and fawned the more they were beaten; that they had lost the divine quality of men, and were become insensible asses. (...) This would not anger a noble heart, this would not animate a soldier's soul; no, but we are bought and sold like apes or monkeys, to be the sport of women, fools, and cowards. (Behn 57-58)

During his monologue, Oroonoko passionately pleads for the dignity of all men (Lipking 2004, 176). He delivers his speech to the men only, but this does not mean that it only applied on the male race. By comparing the slaves to dogs, he emphasises their natural inferiority (Lipking 1996, 273). They are treated like monkeys, to please and entertain the English women. Maybe this can be equalised to the treatment of English women in marriage, only to satisfy and please their dominant husband and thereby commenting on the gender differences.

### 7.3. Use of Pronouns

The distinction between the male and the female gender is also noticeable in little details such as a shift in pronouns. In the short story, Aphra Behn twice mentions the heroic Oroonoko killing a fierce tiger. Interesting about the passages are the narrator's use of pronouns. Behn shifts from female pronouns as *her* and *she*, to male pronouns e.g. *he* or *him*. The next quotation contains the story of how the brave Oroonoko kills the second tiger. It was a monstrous animal and many men attempted to kill the beast, but no one ever succeeded:

Another time, being in the woods, he killed a tiger which had long infested that part (...), some affirming they had shot *her* with several bullets quite through the body at several times, and some swearing they shot *her* through the very heart, and they believed *she* was a devil rather than a mortal thing. (...) They

had not passed very far in it but they heard *her* voice, growling and grumbling as if *she* were pleased with something *she* was doing. When they came in view, they found *her* muzzling in the belly of a new-ravished sheep, which *she* had torn open, and seeing *herself* approached, *she* took fast hold of *her* prey with *her* forepaws, and set a very fierce raging look on Caesar, without offering to approach him for fear, at the same time, of losing what *she* had in possession. (...) When he, going softly to one side of *her*, and hiding his person behind certain herbage that grew high and thick, he took so good aim that, as he intended, he shot *her* just into the eye, and the arrow was sent with so good a will, and so sure a hand, that it stuck in *her* brain, and made *her* caper, and become mad for a moment or two, but being seconded by another arrow, *he* fell dead upon the prey. Caesar cut *him* open with a knife to see where those wounds were that had been reported to him, and why *he* did not die of 'em. But I shall now relate a thing that possibly will find no credit among men, because 'tis a notion commonly received with us, that nothing can receive a wound in the heart and live; but when the heart of this courageous animal was taken out, there were seven bullets of lead in it, and the wounds seamed up with great scars, and *she* lived with the bullets a great while, for it was long since they were shot. (Behn 49-51; emphasis added)

As I emphasised in the passage, Behn first uses the pronouns 'she' and 'her' to refer to the beast, but near the end, she shortly changes the female references to their male versions, to eventually end with the feminine 'she' again. At first glimpse, this seems odd and it perhaps could be explained by the fact that Behn "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" (Behn 5), as she justifies her faults in the opening letter of the short story. However, the fact

that the shift in pronouns happens in both the first and the second fight Oroonoko has with a tiger, indicates that this cannot be considered as a coincidence. As Pearson explains it, the "bizarre tiger is female when strong and aggressive (...), male when powerless and defeated" (Pearson 1991, 185). Looking back at the passage, this makes sense since Behn only uses the male pronouns when describing the death of the fierce and powerful animal. By doing so, Behn emphasises the powerfulness of the female figure and the contrasted powerlessness of men. Furthermore, the fact that the tiger could live with seven bullets of lead in her (female again) heart, not only points out her strong female power, but also the strength of female Nature in general (Erickson 210). Or as Pearson puts it: "Female nature is superior to male civilization" (Pearson 1991, 185). Maybe the heroic Oroonoko is able to overcome female nature by killing female tigers, but this is not the case for the other male figures in the short story. Many men tried to put the beast down, but none of them achieved their goal. And while the black slave slaughtered the first tiger, Martin stood aside and fled along with the women. The fact that Oroonoko is the only male person who is able to defeat female nature, perhaps can be explained by the feminisation of Oroonoko. Although he is fierce and masculine, he can also be seen as a symbol for female power, because of his womanly characterisation.

## 8. Constant Presence of Women

As is already demonstrated, woman writer Aphra Behn is known for her literary work which centres around the female figure. Behn's obsession with the female character is inspired by the tradition of the heroic romance. The desirable women were always present, since they were the ultimate rewards for male courage. As is described by Brown, "As this ideology evolved in the seventeenth-century French prose tradition, dominated by women writers like Madeleine de Scudéry and Madame de LaFayette, women became increasingly central to the romantic action" (Brown 189). It is on this tradition that Behn bases her entire work. The importance of female authorship in *Oroonoko, or; the Royal Slave*, noticeable through the female narrator and the explicit references to her female pen, serves as a symbol for the feminisation of the genre of the novel (Brown 189). Although the male Oroonoko is the protagonist of the short novel, it is noteworthy how female characters are never far away. Every action Oroonoko undertakes, is witnessed by at least one woman in the story and the male character also expresses his fondness for the company of women (Brown 189). Even when the African prince is defeated, he is accompanied by the narrator's mother and sister: "My mother and sister were by him all the while, but not suffered to save him, so rude and wild were the rabble" (Behn 72). According to Richards, "The presence of the narrator's mother and sister at the time of Oroonoko's execution becomes an example of dying 'within the grieving maternal presence of women'" (Richards 653). Both at your birth and in your death, you are accompanied by a maternal presence. It is only on the last page of the novel that the maternally presence of Behn's mother appears (Goreau 49). It shows that in the end, only the presence of familiar female power can bring you comfort. Moreover, the ending of the novel is also characterised by female presence since Behn ends the story with a reference to the beautiful Imoinda, who is the cause of all Oroonoko's actions. As is stated by

Gallagher, "Ending the text with the word 'Imoinda' reminds us of Behn's special fitness to tell this love story, her femaleness, and yet the effect of authorship here transcends all such physical accidents even as it takes them into account" (Gallagher 252). By ending the narrative on a female note, Behn emphasises her female pen and the fact that because she is a woman, she was properly fitted to report a love story that was in need of a female finesse to arouse the appropriate feelings from the reader.

## 9. Conclusion

All things considered, women writer Aphra Behn can be considered as a defender of women's value and as an opponent of the traditional ideologies that only recognise women for the rather passive function in society. The three ideologies which are criticised by the female author are first religious, second economic and third libertine understandings of the appropriate role of women. However, due to the specific setting of *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave*, Behn has to be more creative to express her critique. Compared to her other fictional work, she is not able to base her criticism on the three known ideologies but she has to innovate and link gender with race. Throughout the entire novel, it is indeed never possible to uncouple the connection between race and gender. The descriptions of Oroonoko and Imoinda's bodies, for example, do not only include comments about the gender issues, they are also of importance to show the racial differences. Both the male and the female African are not illustrated as typical black people, but they are both described to the standards of European beauty. Oroonoko is even Europeanised to the point where there was barely no more distinction left between him and white royals. Furthermore, in his elaborate speech about slavery and the racial differences between the slaves and their owners, Oroonoko criticises the inferiority of male and female slaves to the white colonists. Perhaps, Behn implicitly uses this to comment on traditional gender roles in the conventional view on marriage.

Behn also uses physical and social aspects to construct her characters as sexual beings. The obvious sexual differences between the anatomy of men and women fade away because Behn provides her male characters with feminine qualities and her female figures with masculine features, both externally as internally. The traditional sexual role of men is also questioned, since some of the characters are not able to sexually take possession of a woman.



By including all these elements, Behn reverses the traditional gender roles and thereby criticises the conventional view of subordinate females. Women too are allowed to express their feelings through writing and they should also be permitted to earn their own money, without being criticised. Likewise should men also be able to openly express their feelings and to show a sentimental side, instead of always being supposed to think and act rationally.

The treatment of women, as individuals and as a group, is also criticised by the negative picture of female slaves being considered as property and thus not being able to make decisions over their own body. In all three settings in the novel do women, as a group, suffer from the existing laws describing marriage or captivity through slavery. However, Imoinda, as an individual, fights to break the rules. Both as a royal mistress in Coromantien and as a captive slave in Surinam is she an example of female bravery. She does not let Oroonoko's grandfather as well as all the slaves and colonists unwillingly caress her. By fighting her female status as a property of men, she is committed, just as the author Behn, to contribute to a better future for women.

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