

Having Your Beefcake, and Leaving Him Too (Oct. 2001)

Aphra Behn's desire for intimacy and sex with an admiring (and admirable) young man is the foremost inspiration for her creating "The Disappointment" and *Oroonoko*. Claims that either work is primarily concerned with other things testifies largely to Behn's success in misdirecting readers: a goal as vital to her own self-protection as is her success in misdirecting herself into thinking she is in fact writing about and attempting to satisfy something other than her own "suspect" desires. That her desire for sexual intimacy is so real and so pressing to be the reason *why* these works were written, as well as the key factor in determining *how*, exactly, Behn wrote them, will hopefully be demonstrated in this essay. That admitting this desire to herself is so dangerous a thing to do because sexual satisfaction is so suspect a desire for an older woman to admit, develop, and enjoy in eighteenth-century society—even if only through her own writings—so as to make this paper seem a work of scientific detection intent on uncovering her base nature, will be demonstrated beginning with the uncovering of a lie, or a lie-seeming misdirection, Behn tells us in "The Disappointment."

In "The Disappointment" Behn writes, "The nymph's resentments none but I / Can well imagine or condole. But none can guess Lysander's soul, / But those who swayed his destiny" (131-34). This, I believe, is authorial misdirection—for it is precisely Behn who "sways" poor Lysander's destiny: she is the writer, poor Lysander but her hapless prop. *Behn* is the "env[y]ing god [who] conspires / To snatch his power, yet leave[s] him the desire!" (79-80). *She* knows what it is to lack "Nature's support [. . .] / Itself now wants the art to live" (81-83). Like Lysander, she lacks "nature's support": though she desires consummated love, her age makes this ridiculous. It is therefore *her own* "bewitching influence" (139) that dooms Lysander "to the hell of impotence" (140). Why? Because she has discovered a stratagem for bringing sexual intimacy into her life without thereby inviting upon herself a "vast pleasure [. . .] which too much love destroys" (73-74): a "vast pleasure turned to pain" (73).

Lysander's "destiny" is no accident: he *must* suffer so the nymph doesn't have to. The nymph, described as "Abandoned by her pride and shame, / She does her softest joys dispense, / Offering her virgin innocence / A victim to love's sacred flame" (65-

68), is the same nymph who leaves Lysander “fainting on the gloomy bed” (120) with “No print upon the grassy road [. . .] / to instruct pursuing eyes” (124). The virgin whose innocence would have been lost, changing her nature forever, leaves the poetic world an eternal mythic Daphne, leaving the reader alone with Lysander, with his grief swelling into storms, with him cursing his birth, fate, and stars. He alone is left to experience shame. Yet despite the fact that his shame owes to his *inability* to consummate his lust, and despite the likelihood we leave the poem thinking its title well caught its gist, this testifies more to Behn’s art at misdirection than to an absence of ambiguity in the poem: for the verses we read of Cloris before and after his inability to perform are just as appropriate for usage if he actually *had* done the deed. Imagine if after finally “Offering her virgin innocence” (67), Lysander performed, wouldn’t having her return from a trance, explore and find a disarmed snake, be just as appropriate a development if he had discharged as it would be if he hadn’t? In both cases her lover would have been left with no spark for new desire: he would be more shepherd than general. Is it possible that Behn has imagined a way for a woman whose nature would be adversely changed by a sexual act (a virgin’s pure status, in this case) to in fact experience a sexual encounter, with both the reader and the writer prepared to convince themselves otherwise, and thereby avoid harsh self-recriminations and a public’s scorn? If the descriptions offered afford a close-enough facsimile to sex, and if this sexual encounter, if it had occurred, of the sort to have the reader and writer feel someone should probably be punished for it, then this punishment falls on only one of the two involved: Lysander. That is, neither the Nymph nor our narrator, Behn, is left anywhere in sight, with the nymph “o’er the fatal plain,” and our narrator along with her, imagining her resentments, ostensibly quite incapable of “guess[ing] Lysander’s” (133) own. We know, however, that as much as Behn professes no other option than to focus on the nymph, her attendance mostly owes to a need to detach herself from—so as to not too closely identify herself with—Lysander, for in *Oroonoko* we find Behn very well informed as to what happens to souls that rage desire with little hope for satisfaction.

My reader might be thinking that I want to link Lysander’s situation to that of the King of Coramantien in *Oroonoko*. I do—but *as a way* of working my way to a discussion of Onahal. The King, indeed, like Lysander, has a passion for a young beauty—in his case, Imoinda—that because of “nature,” the decrees of time, he is unable to consummate: like Lysander, he has been left embarrassingly impotent.

When Oroonoko considers “laying violent hands on himself,” reason finally prevails when “[t]hey [i.e., his followers] urged all to him that might oppose his rage,” with “nothing weigh[ing] so greatly with him as the king’s old age, incapable of inuring him with Imoinda” (20). A reasonable Oroonoko begins to realize there may be a way to claim Imoinda after all; and the “plot to rescue a princess” introduces us to another antiquated would-be lover: Onahal, a “past mistress of the old king” (24).

With Onahal we have Behn offering for both her and our contemplation, *a woman*, who, like Behn at the time of writing *Oroonoko*, is subject to the “despites and decays of time” (24). Being robbed by nature draws Onahal to react as Lysander did upon learning of how nature pilfered him: she does not spare her fury—she “treated the triumphing happy ones with all the severity, as to liberty and freedom, that was possible, in revenge of those honors they rob [her] off” (24). Like Lysander, Onahal has been left with desire; she hopes she might yet again be seen as desirable by youth of the very best quality. In reference to Aboan—just such a youth—we are told:

This young man was not only one of the best quality, but a man extremely well made and beautiful; and coming often to attend the king to the *otan*, he had subdued the heart of the antiquated Onahal, which had not forgot how pleasant it was to be in love. And though she had some decays in her face, she had none in her sense and wit; she was there agreeable still, even to Aboan’s youth, so that he took pleasure in entertaining her with discourses of love. (25)

Oroonoko and Aboan take advantage of Onahal’s self-delusion to secure a reunion between Oroonoko and Imoinda. But at a cost: Aboan must “suffer [. . .] himself to be caressed in bed by Onahal” (28). Onahal might be unaware of her failure to charm Aboan, but those who would identify themselves with her, would live vicariously *through* her, understand that to a young lover her caresses are but to be suffered. The only way a young man and an older woman can relate with one another where both can be imagined enjoying the experience, is through conversation. However, to a clever and imaginative writer, who might, like Onahal, still hope “she [could] make some impressions [on a young man’s] heart” (25), this is a discovery *to be used* in her own battle between her still enabled wit and whittling age.

Behn has learned—or perhaps rather, confirmed beyond any hopeful countenancing—two important things from her writings of Onahal and Aboan: first,

as mentioned, that there is a way in which a young man could be imagined as being charmed by an older woman which allows for intimacy and reciprocal exchanges; second, that there is a fictional role—namely, as a gatekeeper—based on real advantages of the aged, that can introduce and perhaps even necessitate the introduction of an older woman into a story purportedly all about young lovers. Onahal, as a past mistress, is a “guardian or governant [. . .] to the new and young ones [i.e., Imoinda]” (24). Aboan must “compl[y] [. . .] with her desires” (25). “For then, [. . .] her life lying at [his] [. . .] mercy, she must grant [him] [. . .] the request [he] make[s] in [. . .] [Oroonoko’s] behalf” (25). Oroonoko uses what he has at his disposal—a beautiful proxy in Aboan—to realize his desire to be with Imoinda, just as Behn uses the advantages she has as a writer—the ability to create the proxy Onahal—to explore the consequences of a sexual encounter between an older woman and a younger man, allowed the extenuation and stretch that imagination enables. What Behn learns from this exploration, combined with what she learned from “The Disappointment,” will be put to use in the second part of *Oroonoko*, beginning with Oroonoko’s arrival in Surinam, where Behn, *the writer*, brings herself as close as possible to imagining herself “having subdued the finest of all the King’s subjects to her desires” (26-27).

In the second part of *Oroonoko* Behn does what Onahal wanted to do but could not manage for herself—namely, to subdue “the finest of all the King’s subjects to her desires,” without in “victory” actually becoming more the fool. She captures the attention and compliance of Oroonoko in the same way Onahal did with Aboan: by making clear that the means to what he wants (freedom in this case) lies with her. Much as Onahal and Aboan accomplished for one another, she engages Oroonoko in a reciprocal manner, where each soothes one another’s concerns. She sets the scene for a sexual encounter in much the same way she did with Onahal and Aboan as well, but handles the consummation in a fashion inspired, instead, by Cloris and Lysander—where, that is, overtly, no sex occurs, but where passions are aroused as if it had. Behn is, in her being unaffected by the encounter, therefore much like Cloris; and Oroonoko, with his immediately experiencing a change for the worse, more like Onahal and Lysander. I will expand on each of these machinations in turn.

Oroonoko calls Behn a “Great Mistress” (49), a title in nature akin to the labels—a past mistress, a guardian, a governant—attached to Onahal, a woman Oroonoko knew that “to [. . .] court [. . .] was the way to be great [. . .] [.] [for her]

being [of those] persons that do all affairs and business at court” (25). Behn understands she possesses a similar power over Oroonoko, saying, should he make her doubt him “[i]t would but give us a fear of him, and possibly compel us to treat him so as I should be very loath to behold: that is, it might occasion his confinement” (49). However, although Behn as a character does not do so, Behn *as a writer* makes the same claim upon Oroonoko that Onahal made upon Aboan: To acquire Imoinda, he must first service *her own* sexual needs. Between Behn’s first meeting of Oroonoko and her (i.e., Behn’s) completion of her sporting with him, Imoinda is but twice referred to in the text. The first reference to her within these time-posts is when Behn refers to her in third person, saying she entertained her “with teaching her all the pretty works that I was mistress of, and telling her stories of nuns, and endeavoring to bring her to the knowledge of the true God” (49). Behn, like Onahal, treats the young beauty with “all the severity, as to liberty and freedom, that was possible in revenge of those honors they rob them of” (24). In telling her stories of nuns, she temporarily renders Imoinda a celibate, denying her the sexuality owed a young nymph. The second reference occurs when Oroonoko explains to Behn he fears she might prevent them from returning to his kingdom. He is wise to suspect her, for Behn indeed “holds Imoinda hostage,” just as the envious governess Onahal did, releasing her only *after* she finishes her sports. (We are then told, in a clear afterthought, that despite her complete invisibility in the text Imoinda “was [also] a sharer in all our adventures” [60].)

As a prelude to romance, Behn interacts with Oroonoko in the same socially acceptable way Onahal had before with Aboan—they converse. This allows for the same kind of back-and-forth involvement with one another, with each taking turns reassuring, tending to the other, we saw between Onahal and Aboan. Keep in mind when reading a description of this foreplay in *Oroonoko*, so to not misconstrue the true nature of the conversational exchanges between the “lovers” therein, the back-and-forth sequence of tension and easing of tension in the passage of overt foreplay between Cloris and Lysander in “The Disappointment”:

Her bright eyes sweet, and yet severe,
Where love and shame confusedly strive,
Fresh vigor to Lysander give;
And breathing faintly in his ear,

She cried, "Cease, cease your vain desire,
Or I'll call out—what would you do?
My dearer honor even to you
I cannot, must not give—retire,
Or take this life, whose chiefest part
I gave you with the conquest of my heart. (21-30)

When Aboan (after "The whole affair being agreed upon between the prince" [26] and himself) engages with Onahal, she sighs, cries, and asks when he "will [. . .] be sensible of my passion" (26). She is fearful her eyes had already given her away, and wonders if she possesses beauty-enough to sway him. Aboan calms her, assuring her that her beauty "can still conquer," and of how "he longs for more certain proofs of love than speaking and sighing" (26). We are told she speaks again, but with a different tone (one as if "she hope it true, and could not forbear believing it" [26]), and offers him a gift of pearls—symbols of beauty that never wane—which prompt Aboan to reassure her he is interested in no other but her (charmed in part, he hopes to have convinced her, by her still extant physical beauty). She forces the pearls into his hands anyway, linking the gift to a setting for her later reception of him. All this naughtiness justifies why they take care "that no notice might be taken of their speaking together" (27), because "speaking together" is clearly just verbal cover for their overt flirting. This "speaking," presumably, is pleasurable for both parties, for Behn makes clear that as Onahal has lost "none in her sense and wit," Aboan would take "pleasure in entertaining her with discourses of love" (25).

Behn and Oroonoko share a similar interaction which also clears way for an intimate relationship to develop. But Behn, the writer, precedes it by first linking the two together, telling us that Oroonoko "was impatient to come down to Parham House [. . .] to give me an account of what had happened. I [i.e., Behn] was as impatient to make these lovers a visit" (47). That is, Behn *cheats*—they seem paired before they've even met. Again we are told "this new accident made him more impatient of liberty" (48), an upset they follow by soothing each other. Behn entertains him and "charm[s] him to my company" (49). He admits "these conversations failed not altogether so well to divert him," and that "he liked the company of us women much above men" (49). This is where we hear him call Behn a "Great Mistress," of how her word goes "a great way with him" (49). Later he

confesses he fears his behavior would provoke her into breaking her word to him. She tries to ease his anxiety, but errs in mentioning “confinement,” an error she “strove to soften again in vain” (49). But he assures her he would “act nothing upon the white people,” and that as for herself, “he would sooner forfeit his eternal liberty, and life itself, than lift his hand against his greatest enemy on that place” (49). After their mutual reassurances, Behn tells us he is again impatient, “full of a spirit all rough and fierce [. . .] that could not be tamed to lazy rest,” and that he is eager to exercise himself in [. . .] actions and sports” (50). They then part, meeting again to sport—but not before Behn has had a chance to tell us about her aromatic garden at St. John’s Hill.

Before comparing the similarity of this garden to the meeting place for Onahal’s and Aboan’s embrace, we should note that Behn and Oroonoko have a nervousness-allaying, *sex-ensuring* conversation similar to their own. Oroonoko, like Onahal, admits he suspects his over-eager behavior has ruined any chance of realizing his desires. Behn, like Aboan previously, is then offered a chance to reassure her partner. But Behn, in expressing her own fears, opens herself up to ruin, a concern Oroonoko can abate by assuring her he would do her no harm. We are further told, as we had been before with Aboan, that they are impatient for activity beyond conversation. With Aboan: “those few minutes we have are forced to be snatched for more certain proof of love than speaking and sighing; and such I *languish* for” (26; emphasis added); and with Oroonoko: suddenly he is all-“impatient” for sports and vigorous activity. While “languish” is the adjective most overtly linked to sex in *Oroonoko*, we remember reading in “The Disappointment” of “One day the amorous Lysander, / By an *impatient* passion swayed” (1-2; emphasis added). We should note, too, the marked similarity between how Lysander concludes his wooing of Cloris and Oroonoko’s final reassurance to Behn. Lysander claims sex with, “Or take this life, whose chiefest part I gave you with the conquest of my heart” (29-30)—that is, with his offering up his life and his reference to his lover as a vigorous conqueror. Oroonoko finishes by offering to “forfeit” “life itself,” on behalf of an empowered defender. Full submission is offered, and a lover’s physical needs are supplanted in place of courtliness, concern, and shy retreat.

We know the activity Aboan will be up to is sex, and we know *this* about the setting for the initial setting for his re-union with Onahal: it will occur at a “grove of the otan, which was all of oranges and citrons.” Oroonoko and Aboan are instructed

to wait there, to be taken away to (the bedchambers of) Imoinda and Onahal respectively. Before Oroonoko and Behn engage in their sports, Behn tells us about her house on St. John's Hill, which has a "grove of orange and lemon trees" (52). Through successive paragraphs we are immersed within fragrant imagery; Behn is preparing for herself as she once prepared for Clovis, "a lone thicket made for love" (21). We are told of an "eternal Spring" of "trees, bearing at once all degrees of leaves and fruit from blooming buds to ripe autumn, groves of oranges, lemons, citrons, figs nutmegs, and noble aromatics, continually bearing their fragrances" (51). Of this grove we are told she is sure "the whole globe of the world cannot show so delightful a place as this grove was" (52). And once delineated, she is now herself anxious for action, telling us, "But to our sports" (52). Appropriate to a scene I believe sexual in nature, the sports have about them the feel of a racy bedroom encounter. Behn has moved from mention of an "eternal Spring" to speaking of "the hot countries" (57), from sexual priming to lustful satiation. With the climactic encounter between Onahal and Aboan, Behn spares us the details, so to speak, but it is better in any case for us to have "The Disappointment" in mind when experiencing Behn's accounting of all her hot sporting action.

In "The Disappointment" Behn uses a telling metaphor when describing Lysander's penis—it is a "snake" (110). But this is when she is writing in mock-pastoral mode, when he is a shepherd. It is perhaps, though, not too bold a conjecture that had the penis been featured when writing mock-epic it would have been referred to as a sword. Oroonoko, like Lysander, is a mighty warrior—he is Caesar!, and thus no shepherd. "[H]e took Mr. Martin's sword [desiring] [. . .] him to stand aside, or follow the ladies," and "he met this monstrous beast [i.e., a tiger they are hunting] of might, size and vast limbs, who came with open jaws upon him, and fixing his awful stern eyes full upon those of the beast, and putting himself into a very steady and good aiming posture of defense, ran his sword quite through his breast down to his very heart, home to the hilt of the sword" (53). Once he has slain the tiger, Behn rejoins him (she had previously run away), sees him "lug out the sword from the bosom of the tiger, who was laid in her blood on the ground" (53), and is surprised by his gifting of a tiger cub at her feet.

I believe this passage arouses us in much the same way as if we had just witnessed a sexual encounter between Oroonoko and Behn. As with Lysander, who was "Ready to taste a thousand joys" (71), Oroonoko "meets this monstrous beast"

(53). As with Cloris, Behn is elsewhere. When Cloris returns from her trance, and when Behn returns after the kill, both witness an item similar in nature to a penis that has lost its potency, that has gone flaccid. Lysander's penis is a "flower," owing to his inability to bring "fleeting vigor back" (87); Oroonoko *lugs* his sword, suggesting—considering how previously his running the tiger on through to the hilt suggested the deep penetration of an erect penis—the labor in the withdrawal of a discharged one. The cute cub is akin to the mentioning of flowers after a sexual encounter: it suits the relaxed mood and play of consummated love. Further, if we take Oroonoko laying the cub at her feet as his presenting her with a gift, he mimics here Onahal's gift of pearls to Aboan, something we know was closely linked to an anticipated sexual encounter between them. In fact, to provide and receive gifts is the primary impetus behind further sports. He asks, "What trophies and garlands, ladies, will you make, if I bring you the heart of this ravenous beast?" (53-54). Behn tells us, "We all promised he should be rewarded at all our hands" (54). The hunting of tigers is explicitly linked here to rewards by women; and Behn, as the writer of "The Disappointment," as having written, "All her unguarded beauties lie / The spoils and trophies of the enemy" (39-40), clearly shows an inclination to link trophies to sexual consummation.

If we are not convinced Behn thinks a sword a penis in this context, what of a snake, or a near-snake, that appears while they sport? There is a "numb eel" (55), an eel Behn had eaten. And if not the eel, what of fishing rods or flutes, which are also present? Or what about each and/or all in conjunction with the jungle natives, when they:

By degrees [. . .] grew more bold, 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, which we gave them, and they tied about their legs [. . .] In fine, we suffered them to survey us as they pleased, and we thought they would never have done admiring us. (57)

Or in conjunction with how similar these natives' "surveying" seems to how Behn described Lysander's lustful advancement upon Cloris? Lysander didn't "[b]y degrees [. . .] grow more bold," but he did "without respect or fear [. . .] seek the object of his vows" (41-42), which is not as incremental but toward the same end.

Lysander didn't "touch [her] [. . .], laying [his] hands upon all the features of [her] face, feeling our breasts and arms," but he did "Kiss her mouth" (34), "press / Upon her swelling snowy breast" (37), and "By swift degrees advance where / his daring hand that altar seized" (44-45), which amounts to much the same, if more artfully guided. Lysander didn't take advantage of an "offer" "to survey as [he] pleased," nor can we be sure he "never stopped admiring" her, but he did try to take full advantage of Cloris being "Abandoned by her pride and shame / [so] She does her softest joys dispense / Offering her virgin innocence" (67), which is no less the enthused partaking of pleasures before him. And it is actually possible that to Behn—the writer—Lysander would in some sense actually have been there if Oroonoko hadn't been. But despite all to the contrary—*he was*.

Just as Behn was absent from Oroonoko's encounter with a predator, Oroonoko is absent from the one present here, and we should consider these absences equivalent and suggestive—as implicating. Behn uses a technique here she develops in "The Disappointment" where a sexual encounter/experience is communicated but where no such thing is *overtly* shown to take place. Both Oroonoko and Behn have sexual and intense encounters where, in each case, one of them is absent from the scene. Yet once consummation occurs—with the lugging out of the sword, with the natives finishing their surveying—the absent partner suddenly reappears. There is a sense, though, that the ostensibly absent partner was actually present throughout. That is, assuming we accept Onahal as a version of Behn, a proxy in the nature and intensity of her desires, can we hear of a ravenous beast that fixes "her long nails in his flesh" and not think of predatory Onahal, who "took her dear Aboan [. . .] where he suffered himself to be caressed in bed" (28)? And can we encounter the natives and not also have in mind the princely but still native Oroonoko, a link we first make but start setting when subsequently told of how as "[G]eneral" Caesar he "had in mind to see and talk with their war captains," of how, though he considered their "courage too brutal to be applauded," he still "expressed his esteem of them" (59), and when we come to know all of them not just as warriors but as trophy hunters?

Just as Imoinda was available to Oroonoko once Onahal had "tasted a thousand joys" from Aboan, with the sporting now complete, the pair is reunited: evidence, I think, toward understanding the reading experience of the sports as satisfying anyone who could identify with Onahal's need to believe herself still "of beauty enough engaging [. . .] to be desirable," who hopes she "can have [young] lovers still" (26),

and who would similarly be inclined to first take advantage of the young before granting them access to their own joys. I believe this *Behn's* desire as much as it is Onahal's, but because Onahal's desire, once realized, leads to a shameful situation where her audience understands her physical charms were in fact non-existing, that they had actually had no effect other than to amuse or—more likely—horrify, that her rapture in sex was for him simply a suffering, even with Behn's better disguised affair (so that “no notice might be taken” [27]), some shame would come from having contrived it. Fortunately for Behn she has learned this shame can be dispersed through the same art that brought it into existence in the first place. *Through her plotting*, that is, she can arrange for all the consequences arising from shameful behavior to fall on but one of the two actually involved.

After Cloris flees him, Lysander's “silent griefs swell up to storms, / And not one god his fury spares; / He cursed his birth, his fate, his stars” (147). Shortly after the sports, Oroonoko's griefs also swell up to storms, as he exempts little of their daily life from his curses:

Caesar [Oroonoko] [. . .] made a harangue to them 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 them 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, fit only to bear, Nay worse, an ass, or dog, or horse having done his duty, could lie down in retreat, and rise to work again, and while he did his duty endured no stripes; but men, villainous, senseless men such as they, toiled on all the tedious week till black Friday, and then, whether they worked or not, whether they were faulty or meriting, they promiscuously, the innocent with the guilty, suffered the infamous whip, the sorded stripes, from their fellow slaves till their blood trickled from all parts of their body, blood whose every drop ought to be revenged with a life of some of those tyrants that impose it. “And why,” said he, “my dear friends and fellow sufferers, should we be slaves to an unknown people? Have they vanquished us nobly in fight? Have they won us

in honorable battle? And are we, by the chance of war, become their slaves? 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, and the support of rogues, runagades, that have abandoned their own countries, for raping, murders, thefts, and villainies. Do you not hear every day how they upbraid each other with infamy of life below the wildest salvages, and shall we render obedience to such a degenerate race, who have no one human virtue left to distinguish them from the vilest creatures? Will you, I say, suffer the lash from such hands? (61-62)

As with Lysander, who, after cursing his birth, his fate, and the stars, finishes by cursing the "soft bewitching influence" of a woman (149), Oroonoko concludes his own diatribe by saying: "But if there were a woman among them so degenerate from love and virtue to chose slavery before the pursuit of her husband, and with the hazard of her life to share with him in his fortunes, that such a one ought to be abandoned, and left as a prey to the common enemy" (63). Quite a change in Oroonoko here from the one who asked of Behn, "What trophies and garlands, ladies, will you make me, if I bring you home the heart of this ravenous beast" (53-54), and who "made it his business to search out and provide for our entertainment" (59). But the effect of reading this very lengthy, this very aggressive diatribe is to have the sports which immediately preceded it become of much less interest, as a man savagely battles against a world pit against him. And so, too, the understanding of Behn and Oroonoko as a couple.

Oroonoko is made into a "monster of the wood" (72) just after Behn begins to manifest herself in the text more as the writer of *Oroonoko* than as a character within it, a writer who increasingly associates herself with qualities notably different from transmogrified Oroonoko's: "We met on the river with Colonel Martin, a man of great gallantry, wit, and goodness, and, whom I have celebrated in a character of my new comedy, by his own name, in memory of so brave a man. He was wise and eloquent" (68). Meanwhile, Oroonoko exists a world apart: "his grief swelled up to rage; he tore, he raved, he roared, like some monster of the wood" (72). Behn actually distances herself from him in several ways. First, she attempts to convince us that the sporting was of no particular import; she describes it ostensibly because it was her near duty to record all instances of his activity she partook in or had been aware of—

but right due for a noble personage. Then from a chronicler whose relationship with her subject implies a respectable distance between them, she becomes a writer of comedies, making Oroonoko but one subject of interest of a varied many. Second, as Behn distances herself further and further from *Oroonoko*—forward to her writing of him in the present rather than the past, and away geographically to England—Oroonoko, despite his rage and capacity for effective action, is doomed to be trapped and killed on remote southern Surinam. Third, and as we have seen, Oroonoko becomes of a kind that it no longer seems likely that Behn actually could well “guess [the nature of] his soul” (134).

Why, one might well ask, is all this connivance necessary, since the Behn that is a character in the novel is a much, much younger Behn than the one writing it, was in fact of an age and status where it might seem not so inappropriate if, while still being primarily fixed upon Imoinda, always devoted to her, Oroonoko acknowledged some interest in casual flirtations with a genteel hostess? An obvious explanation would lie in her having chosen to account for the rise and fall of a near singularly great and noble prince, and such rarities were understood to act only in very specific ways, to hold to a tight script, as it were, involving much more lordly forbearance than courtly sweets. Possibly—but I don’t buy it. Instead, the masking owes to the *character* Behn being, in a very real sense, the very same age as the *writer* Behn while writing/experiencing *Oroonoko* so to help intensify, make more real, the feeling that the sports are happening to the writer during the here and now of the time of writing rather than some time before in the less stark long ago. Note that Behn plays the role of a great governess, a role we have been instructed to associate with the aged, not the youthful. Note that Behn primarily emphasizes, draws attention to, her skill in conversation—a skill, along with wit, we have been told so prominent in the aged that it can substitute for such charms no longer available. And note most especially that the setting for the sporting is a near mirror-image the one imagined for the aged Onahal, when Oroonoko and Aboan paid her call in their excited sport to rescue a princess.

Some readers might object to the claim that Oroonoko’s fate was largely determined by the current psychological/sexual needs of the author, since his fate—or at least, his execution—is a match for that suffered upon Charles I, but I would argue for understanding this objection as but a consequence of successful authorial misdirection. Behn needs for both herself and her readers to think the novel primarily

a faithful, pious, recording of a great man's life. Why? Because she must disarm herself (and us, her imagined and real readers and critics) of her considerable poetic awareness while reading the piece. Incurring upon herself and her readers the upright, serious, intolerant reading posture—this containment—is crucial, because if we turn to the work alert to poetic technique and contemplative of courtier's motive, the real intentions for writing the piece become more open to view—and to critique.

Through Onahal, Behn has shown us there exists in her time a notable distinction and a loaded difference between speaking/writing and real action. Harold Weber writes that “speaking and thinking venery [sexual desires] define the limits of a woman's sexual prerogatives: to indulge those thoughts, to turn speech into action, confronts female characters [. . .] with the vast gulf between the maid or wife and the whore” (*The Restoration Rake-Hero* 133). Yet women are in a bind because “[e]ven though libertine attitudes depended on assumptions that would seem to promise acceptance of female sexuality, women remained unable to enjoy the sexual liberties taken for granted by men. Women after the Restoration, even among the most debauched section of the population, occupy a world of strict sexual limitations” (148). There was a “severe morality directed against women when what all knew to go on in private suddenly became public [. . .] [:] all the prudery of the Court was let loose [. . .] [:] vociferous in demanding justice” (148). Yet we cannot understand the distinction between writing about sexual desires and acting upon them, whatever the importance in the distinction, as being well articulated or understood at this time. Owing to her being a successful playwright, Behn was well aware that writing for a public amounted to indecent self-exposure to the world. There *was* great risk, as Weber explains:

Yet the public ridicule she suffered reveals the very high price she had to pay for her success. [. . .] In attempting to move outside of the restricted roles ordinarily occupied by women, Behn became a convenient target for those who refused to accept the participation of women in the larger social world: To publish one's work, then, was to make oneself 'public': to expose oneself to 'the world.' Women who did so violated their feminine modesty both by egressing from the private sphere which was their proper domain and by permitting foreign eyes access to what ought to remain hidden and anonymous. (151)

Weber tells us that Behn simply refused to remain anonymous, and reminds us that “in doing so [. . .] she placed herself in a position where both her morality and her femininity could be questioned” (151). So we have a situation where women possess circumscribed possibilities for acceptable sexual gratification, in a libertine world where sexual desires constitute the context in which everyone participates and can be expected to be judged within: Is it not then appropriate to assume that in the one area where sexual desire might be expressed—in writing—that these written words become so inflated to trespass beyond the vicarious and actually become lived experience? And if any slip from privately kept to public evidencing of the desire should be expected to be eagerly used to fuel the popular courtier sport of reducing a lady to a whore, is it not likely that Behn would need to disguise from her readers, from *herself*, the satisfaction of her sexual desires through her writing? The best way to dissuade both herself and her readers from considering other possible but less legitimate purposes for the novel is to bring into the story an execution that couldn’t help but remind contemporaries of Charles I’s own. She presents us, she presents herself, with quite the challenge: You couldn’t possibly be thinking sex, anything at all lurid, while I document my umbrage at the execution of our past king, could you? However we would answer, we might at least to some extent back off and disarm ourselves of the conceptual tools necessary for an alert poetic reading of her work, so that we are not in some way culpable of disregard for hierarchy and right-place, prove ourselves in sympathy with evident barbarians. She wants pious readers, not wits, poetically informed and ready-primed to note the methods of their kind.

But if we *are* ready to spot contrivance, we must acknowledge that the structuring of *Oroonoko* is similar to that of “The Disappointment.” Specifically, that the number of words compared as a proportion to the whole of the work chronicling Oroonoko’s fate after the sports, is not dissimilar to the number of lines detailing Lysander’s fate after Cloris departs him in “The Disappointment.” I believe this to be space to ensure a comfortable, an assured, distancing of the narrator from her male protagonist. This distancing, required so we do not associate the passions aroused in *Oroonoko* with the writer of the work in “The Disappointment,” is not as crucial for Behn in that work because the passions at work there are explored using familiar mock-epic and mock-pastoral imagery, which naturally work to help keep the writer in mind as a wit, as a removed observer of the scene; but it is crucial in *Oroonoko*,

where to *close* the distance between herself and her fictional lover she tells us over and over again that what she writes is a *true* account of all that happened. By telling us immediately after the sports that she is offering a chronicle of real happenings, she helps substantiate them as such: she is reminding herself that she is describing the sports, not simply narrating them. The distinction she would have understood between description and narration is crucial to understand here, because therein lies an explanation as to why Behn chose to write a *chronicle* of *Oroonoko* rather than a more overtly fictional *Oroonoko*.

According to Howard Marchitello, “[d]escription [. . .] resists the appropriative nature of possession that comes to characterize narrationality in which the other always exists secondarily—after the fact, as it were, of the *narrator’s* own primary and privileged existence” (94; emphasis added). By telling herself she is offering a faithful record and description of events, in the sense Marchitello describes, Behn manages them so they seem exterior to herself, so they accumulate and become more something of the real world than simply of her own making. Her veiled sexual exchange with Oroonoko becomes, not passions created through her imagination, a product of her own mind, her own writing, but passions generated in her as the consequence of actions *of someone else* towards her. Behn, in writing in a way which comes close to crossing the private/public divide, with all of its associated perilous consequences, is precariously involved in the passions of this text in a way she is not in “The Disappointment.” It is *because* the passions are made to feel so real that Oroonoko must, like Lysander, experience all sorts of compromising emotional states, making him a monster: *Because* Oroonoko is elevated to a status where he is more than a narrative construct, is more than words, is more nearly real, Behn is able to, and does, dump the equally real agitating emotions she experiences in creating and immersing herself in a near sexual encounter *into him*. Thereby, the terrible change of status normally due a woman who compromises her virtues is—as was true with Cloris—entirely left for her male partner to experience: a brutal but effective solution.

More attending to poetics, we would note in *Oroonoko* the doubleness of the sequence involving the rescue of a princess in Coramantien and the sporting sequence in Surinam. We would then understand the sequence in Coramantien, precisely because it leads to the re-union of Oroonoko and Imoinda, as no mere diversion but rather as the *climax* of the first part of *Oroonoko*: the part arousing the highest degree of interest owing to it satisfying a desire we had been bated into

anticipating since the beginning of the work. Together, both of these scenes form the center of the work, with everything else either leading up to and away from them, a chiasmus (AB / BA) where “A” is Oroonoko distant from Behn; the movement from “A” to “B” a closing of this distance in the first half (“’tis fit I tell you the manner of bringing them to these new colonies” [9]); with “B” Oroonoko united to a representative of the writer—Onahal in part one, and Behn in part two; and “B” to “A” the plot of the second half of the work, the movement from Oroonoko and Behn as a couple to him once again removed and remote from her.

This is why criticism of *Oroonoko* that focuses on anything other than Behn’s use of the text to satisfy her own sexual desires, testifies so well to Behn’s skill as a writer. Her expertise in poetics is such she can subdue what ought really to command our attendance: the structuring of the scenes and the words we would attend to less narrowly if we thought of the work as a contrivance, as not so much a work of sober accounting as an act of play and mischief. In “The Disappointment” Behn shows that words like “snake” are to be primarily understood as metaphors for penis, and words like “trophy,” metaphors or similes for sexual satisfaction, yet as I have shown the sporting sequence is full of penis-seeming objects, contains several references to trophies, and she still claims (surprisingly convincingly, considering how many critics consider the sequence odd for a reason Behn would hardly object to—namely, for it amounting to a unnecessary intrusion in a work mostly concerned with greater things) the sequence testifies to Oroonoko’s character!” (69).

Some critics have pointed out how Behn creates protagonists that are flawed so that they are primed for other’s exploitation. Robert Chibka, for one, writes that Oroonoko is made to be “the perfect fool for the knaves who surround him” (“Oh! Do Not Fear a Woman’s Invention” 515), which he believes Oroonoko’s tragic flaw. But Chibka does not implicate Behn, the writer, as akin in mischief intent these untrustworthy knaves, even though she, being the one inclined to make him into a “perfect fool” in the first place, was certainly empowered to make use of him herself. But according to Chibka, if she is using him in any way at his expense, it is only to better please and serve her audience, which still leaves her actually mostly self-denying: “disdain[ing] the arrangement of a narrative ‘at the Poet’s pleasure,’ [. . .] [Behn] admits to editing and arranging her story so that what was ‘pleasant to us’ need not ‘prove tedious and heavy to [her] [. . .] Reader’”; “Pleasure (the reader’s not the poet’s) will indeed dictate the management of her story” (514). Chibka is no fool;

he for example recognizes that “[a]t times *Oroonoko* seems to resemble the Surinamese numb eel, making critics on contact lose their feel for narrative texture” (511). But he is yet still naïve enough to not ask if *Oroonoko* is made to seem so susceptible to other’s use, not just to suit knaves’ alteriors or audience’ expectations but to better serve and satisfy the depriver herself—Behn.

In her *Aphra Behn’s Afterlife*, Jane Spencer implicates the writer Behn in a way Chibka fails to. She believes Behn uses Imoinda as a proxy, but shares Chibka’s understanding of Behn as virtuous. She writes: “Imoinda here is a fantasy substitute for the heroic action the narrator cannot take. The split between the two women expresses anxieties about narrative position: to take on a narrator’s authority, it seems, is also to accept a position on the fringes of the action, unable to intervene” (232). In suggesting that the writing of the text was so vivid and powerful for Behn that she would want to be in on the sports, Spenser’s argument is similar to mine, but in suggesting that Behn’s position on “the fringes of action” was somehow forced on her, and by arguing that Behn has well-meaning intentions for *Oroonoko* at this point of the text, also so very different. I will quote from Spenser once again as I believe the following passage offers the most familiar and most preferred conception of *Oroonoko* and Behn for contemporary critics:

Behn’s *Oroonoko*, then, is a troubled and opaque text, full of anxious claims and obscure quarrels. It is not a clear attack on the institution and practices of slavery, but the sympathetic treatment of *Oroonoko* and Imoinda, the descriptions of white cruelty, and even the narrator’s very inconsistencies and divided position, have the effect of presenting a disturbing picture of colonial life, and provide the germ for the later, abolitionist development of *Oroonoko*’s story. (232)

Spencer does note that, beginning especially with “the 1696 ‘Memoirs’ of Behn, whether composed, compiled, or merely commissioned by [her friend Charles] Gildon” (34), eighteenth-century readers were drawn “to the titillating idea of a sexual relationship between *Oroonoko* and [Behn]” (35). Spenser says that it was through a repetition of rumors and denials “that eighteenth-century readers approached *Oroonoko* alerted to the idea of intimacy between the writer and a hero who was understood to be authentic” (35). I am arguing that we should be alert for the same—

and as well to the poetic toolkit for writing of sexual passion she had created for herself by the time of her writing of *Oroonoko*. I have argued that Behn herself would have been pleased by the reaction of contemporary critics to her writings because they have largely exonerated her of any wrongdoing, choosing instead to focus their hostility on other targets. Like Behn, who dumped disturbing passions into *Lysander* and *Oroonoko* so to find herself prettily emptied of them herself, critics have targeted men / patriarchy and left us with a near pristine Behn. Thereby, Behn has achieved the wished-for effect upon us she could not hope to have procured in her contemporaries. Still, even amongst her own contemporaries, Behn could be heralded as one who “did at once a Masculine wit express / And all the softness of a Femal tenderness” (266). She could be compared to Eve, who, although associated with the fall, was also “[their] first mother” (266). Spencer tells us that the “idea of [Behn] as a female champion for other women to emulate proved a potent one in the following decade [after her death],” even though present too were early anticipations of the “worries of many later women writers [her failure in virtue]” (31).

Spenser, like so many critics, believes that emerging understandings of Behn as primarily a writer of sexual fantasies is *necessarily* linked to a disparaging culture-wide re-evaluation of women. Spencer writes how a “link made between [. . .] Behn and Milton’s Eve illuminates the formation and masculinization of the English literary canon during the eighteenth century. It is only one example of the recurrent definition of her in terms of the sinful and sexual body as opposed to the heaven-seeking and spiritual mind of the male genius” (267). Milton is conceived in a way Behn wished she could be: “His choice of heavenly subject made the poet himself appear a spiritual figure, rising heavenwards” (267). Behn, by contrast, with “her familiar, wordly-wise poetic persona and fictional narrator, her discussion of sex, political intrigue, and other mundane matters, and her choice of comedy and irony” (267), could hardly be more opposite. Behn, and female poets in general, began to be conceived in such a way that “made so much more of her [and their] femininity and sexuality than of her creativity” (268). There arose the growth of a “myth about Behn, which both drew on received notions of the relationship between a female writer and her work, and set the tone for the reception of later women writers. The myth is that Behn’s writing reflects a life pre-eminently concerned with sexual love” (20).

And Spencer tells us that “[t]o discuss an author’s life in this way—as the story of her writing career—always risks leaving the impression that this is the way she herself

thought about it” (21), something, as I have shown, she attempts to exonerate Behn from. I am well aware that an estimation of Behn as a female poet of over-flowing passions can be used to sustain social-sphere divisions by sex, of calcified suppression and cruelty, and I think it very likely that a good portion of the eighteenth-century interpretation of Behn’s works as just imaginative dalliances between a writer and her fantasy lovers, *was* moved, not in any way to fairly assess her but simply to madden her. But, still—*this is* what she was up to. It would have been much more accurate and fair an assessment had it showed more appreciation for the intelligence, creativity, and bravado required to create a space wherein an author could plausibly be imagined enjoying sexual pleasures with her literary creations, but to my mind it is still a vastly more accurate reading of her work than ones which have Behn spinning lively tales—but principally *for* sober intent. The real problem for us moderns is our difficulty in understanding that this need not be a put-down. It can and should be understood as a tribute, a call for her revival as a writer to be celebrated, especially for her *not* being in the mold of the eighteenth-century man of reason. How immensely dull this conception was! To my mind, to have denigrated passions, have them principally embodied in women, denied men greater acquaintance with the kinds of feelings and passions that make life most worth living. Behn lived at a time where the sexual appetite wasn’t “for mature audiences only,” always something of a no-no, that is, but where women still faced being seen as whores if caught indiscreetly acting upon their sexual desires. Further, a younger woman was the only appropriate target for sexual amours: the desires in older women were to be suffered, were fit only for ridicule. For Behn to create a simulacrum, an artificial world in a historical account/novel that allowed for satisfaction of this desire, is a remarkable accomplishment to be celebrated. And as for the idea that what women require most is full recognition of their unlimited *intellectual* capacities, I have two responses: first, the millennium (plus) long “elevation of the cognitive over the emotional aspect of our mind” (Greenspan 2) which has so profoundly influenced Western thought, needs to be exorcised so to stop its haunting of our present; second, if we create or need such a world, you can be sure that I for one will start turning to romance to find myself living in a more humanly satisfying world. And to those who would frown upon me, not share with me my departure, risk inuring themselves to my fate: I’m with Amazon princesses in a grove of ripening citrus—and you? Yes, the bitter, in the form of anacondas, has arrived, but I’ve learned clever means are at hand to make

them actually add to all our fun.

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