Chapter 4

Cast-Mistresses: The Widow Figure in *Oroonoko*

Kristina Bross and Kathryn Rummell

Aphra Behn's prose narrative *Oroonoko* seems bent on confusion. A mix of settings, times, and narrative strategies, the story begins with a brief description of Surinam, the primary setting, moves to West Africa to detail the background of Oroonoko as a young, noble warrior in Coramantien, and then returns to its New World setting. Fictional, autobiographical, and historic elements mingle in a tale that contains both heroic and bathetic sentiments, recounted memoir-style by an older narrator and through as-told-to stories of the tale's main character. By contrast, Thomas Southerne's 1696 revision of Behn's prose narrative into a five act drama (also titled *Oroonoko*) is a much more orderly retelling of the story. Its only major complication, a split plot, resolves cleanly into clearly tragic and clearly comic conclusions. Southerne's neatly-staged play avoids Behn's eclecticism, in part by confining the West African scenes to the background and eliminating any staging of Coramantien altogether.

Many of Southerne's changes have been well documented in recent scholarship - his transformation of Behn's narrator into the cross-dressing Charlotte Welldon and the 'whitening' of Imoinda in particular have been the focus of excellent commentary.¹ Surprisingly little attention has been paid, however, to an equally striking departure from his source: Southerne's introduction of a stock character from Restoration drama, the rich, man-hungry widow.² For readers familiar only with Behn's original of *Oroonoko* - and even for some who know both works - Southerne's Widow Lackitt may come as a surprise; there seems to be no parallel character in Behn's work to this conventional stage widow.³ This very conventionality, however, masks her connections to Behn's more experimental narrative. Older, wealthy, full of sexual desire, wily: these characteristics describe Widow Lackitt, but they also describe Onahal, the 'cast-mistress' of the Coramantien king and an important female character from Behn's West African sequence who is lost in Southerne's revision.⁴ Indeed, attention to 'widow figures,' especially to Onahal, makes the links between the first and last parts of Behn's narrative clear and helps make sense of the work's disparate elements. And, although Widow Lackitt and Onahal are relatively minor characters, they exemplify each author's approach to the intersecting issues of slavery, marriage, and women's agency.

Further, we see a parallel between these widow figures and Behn herself. At the time of *Oroonoko's* publication, Behn was both an older widow and a possible 'cast-mistress.' It is not surprising, then, that she creates a female narrator who also functions like a widow in the text; though she doesn't lose a husband, the death of the narrator's father leaves her largely independent in Surinam. This female narrator, who holds a vexed position of authority over Oroonoko and Imoinda but who is incapable of saving their lives, represents Behn's frustrations at her own lack of power in the male-dominated literary world, a circumscribed position that Southerne is happy to reflect in his representations of women who attempt to 'author' their own stories. However, as we will see, though Behn's narrator is not powerful enough to overcome the patriarchal politics in Surinam, she nonetheless seizes narrative control to tell Oroonoko's story and ensure Behn a lasting place in the literary canon. In order to understand the limits and possibilities of female agency (both political and rhetorical), we must first understand the place and function of the widow figure in Southerne's and Behn's texts.

A comparison of Widow Lackitt and Onahal may seem strained; after all, Lackitt is a white woman who, while limited by her status as a woman, also exerts some power and authority in Surinam as a slave owner. She enjoys friendships and has neighborly (or at least business) relations with many colonists, both men and women. Onahal, by contrast, is an African woman in Coramantien who could very easily become enslaved to the likes of Widow Lackitt. She is not technically a widow, but rather is immured in the Otan, the king's harem, forbidden contact with any but the king's other wives. However, at the risk of erasing these differences, we would like to suggest that a comparison of these two characters can and should be made on the basis of their status within their respective (fictionalized) cultures. Behn's Coramantien society, though clearly meant to be an exotic, distant setting, nonetheless functions as a (to the English) familiar patriarchal society after the fashion of Restoration London.⁵ A similar case can be made for women's position in Southerne's Surinam. In both Coramantien and Surinam, Onahal and Lackitt, as well as most of the other female characters, confront the same dilemmas of finding suitable sexual partners, pursuing their own desires, and forging friendships with women who are, in the marketplace of courtship, their personal and economic rivals.

In both of these fictional societies, however, the widow figure has a unique position. Sexually experienced, she knows what she likes in a man; wealthy and largely independent, she has the means to pursue him. Such discernment and ambition in a woman are risky in a society that, while affording the 'widow' a certain amount of self determination, particularly as to her economic position, nonetheless reserve as inviolable the romantic or marital relations that gave her that status in the first place. In short, while both of these women are rich, they cannot successfully buy their own way into the marriage or sexual market in which they are commodities and not traders. The reduction to chattel of women who are in so many other ways 'self-possessed' could make for radical social commentary, and, indeed, some critics make just this claim for Southerne's work as he stages the

parallels between the marriage market of white women and the slave market of (especially) black men in Surinam.⁶ However, a closer look at the characterization and fate of Widow Lackitt, especially in comparison to Behn's Onahal, illustrates that the comic widow undercuts the play's purported social commentary.

In Behn's narrative, by contrast, the widow figure, with her uniquely powerful and yet dangerous position, is a key to the work as a whole, both in terms of structure and characterization. In the Coramantien court intrigue involving Onahal, a powerful female character who attempts to 'narrate' her own romantic plot, Behn offers an object lesson on the dangers of female alliances. Such alliances are ultimately circumscribed by the patriarchy and can prove dangerous, indeed fatal, if they accord too much power to women. With this lesson, Behn teaches her readers to understand better the self-protective decisions of her controversial female narrator and to see that while the narrator's ability to tell Oronoko's story might point to a kind of limited control in the literary patriarchy of London it nonetheless cannot change the fact that the narrator is politically powerless in Surinam.

***

The most obvious formal difference between Behn's and Southerne's pieces is, of course, generic, which may help to explain the function of the widow figure in each work. Behn's work is a prose fiction that critics have compared to later novels, especially to those of Defoe (see Guffey). Furthermore, her narrative is a tragedy, ending with the deaths of Oroonoko and his pregnant wife Imoinda. Southerne's work, on the other hand, is a drama - a split-plot tragicomedy - that retains the pathos of Oroonoko's story tempered by a traditional comic marriage plot. His decision to add the comic plot to Behn's fully serious and tragic story of the royal prince raises the question of motive: why did he choose to do so? And why did Behn, who had already proven herself a successful comic playwright, so scrupulously avoid comedy in her story?⁷

Ironically, in his dedicatory epistle to his *Oroonoko*, Southerne acknowledges his debt to Behn and famously wonders why she never brought her most compelling hero to the stage herself.⁸ Critics seeking to make sense of his split-plot form have suggested that with it he mirrored his contemporary society and mourned the loss of certain heroic or fraternal ideals.⁹ Specifically, Mary Vermillion reads Southerne's genre choice as his way of attacking the dangerous encroachment of women writers, contending that Southerne regrets women's partial entrance into the male-dominated world of letters (28). Vermillion's argument helps make sense of Southerne's choices, but understanding his variations on *Oroonoko* also sheds light on Behn's position. If Southerne's revision functions as an attack on women's entrance into male spheres, a conservative retelling of Behn's prose fiction narrated by a woman, the comic plot with Widow

Lackitt as a central character stands in stark contrast to the very serious message Behn delivers about the place and power of women in Restoration society.

Briefly, Southerne's comic plot introduces Charlotte and Lucy, two sisters recently arrived in Surinam from London in order to go 'a-husband-hunting into America' (1.1.4). Charlotte dresses in men's clothing in order to claim the inheritance of a recently deceased planter, and in this guise s/he is desired by the Widow Lackitt. Charlotte as 'Welldon' convinces the widow to pair her foolish, effeminate son with Lucy in order to clear the way for their own marriage. On her wedding night with the widow, Charlotte uses another character, Jack Stanmore, who had long been courting Lackitt to no avail, as a sexual stand-in. Meanwhile, as Welldon, she befriends Jack's cousin Stanmore, a desirable planter, and interests him in the picture of her 'cousin' - actually herself in female clothing. When the 'unmasking' comes, Lucy has a rich and tractable husband in the Widow's son Daniel, Jack Stanmore has the Widow, and Charlotte, having cheated Lackitt out of a small fortune, chooses Stanmore for her own husband.¹⁰

It is Charlotte's control of the situation that has led some readers to see the play as socially radical. Maximillian E. Novak and David Stuart Rodes, for instance, point to Southerne's implicit critique of women's oppression in marriage (xiii-xlii), and Jacqueline Pearson calls his work 'one of the most challenging and subversive presentations of women in the period' (*Prostituted Muse* 145). Indeed, the happy ending depends on Charlotte's authorial abilities. She puts on men's clothes and manipulates Stanmore, Jack and the Widow Lackitt to achieve her ends in a wealthy match for her sister and a companionate marriage for herself. As she explains to Stanmore in the last act, she 'made that little plot' - that is, her masquerade as first Welldon and then as Welldon's cousin - in order to assure herself of his affection (5.1.71). This happy ending contrasts with the situation of most women of the period who could not similarly spin a 'little plot' and choose their own husbands. Like Africans shipped to Surinam, women are traded and sold on the 'marriage' rather than the 'slave' market, a connection that the opening scene strongly marks. Charlotte and Lucy discuss their reasons for coming to America, revealing that in London, they were 'out of fashion.' Charlotte argues that in London women are like silks: 'you may tumble 'em over and over at their first coming up and never disparage their price; but they fall upon wearing immediately, lower and lower in their value, till they come to the broker at last' (1.1.27-30). Women, like slaves, are little more than commodities for men to buy and sell, and Charlotte's authoring of her 'little plot' might lead to the conclusion that Southerne is denouncing women's oppression in the marriage market.

Indeed, if Charlotte's agency alone in the comic plot is examined, we are led to the conclusion that Southerne is likening the plight of women and of slaves - and condemning the marriage and slave markets together. However, a fuller exploration of women's place in the play (or at least in the comic plot) and of Southerne's linkage of women and slaves must include an analysis of Widow Lackitt, for it is her losses that make possible Charlotte's gains, her manipulation that creates Charlotte's agency, and her ridicule that provides Charlotte's dignity. Ultimately, Lackitt's role undercuts the notion that the play critiques women's

oppression; in fact, Southerne's treatment of the Widow endorses women's subordinate status.

Southerne does give Widow Lackitt admirable characteristics; she is not completely a buffoon nor a fool (that distinction is reserved for Daniel, whom Stanmore describes as Lackitt's 'boobily son'). Lackitt reveals in her dialogue a sagacious understanding about the relative 'worth' of young versus old women, but she also understands that her experience (and fortune) are worthy of desire. After confessing that she would be willing to marry Welldon, she worries that she may have overstepped the bounds of 'modesty,' but upon reflection notes 'modesty means nothing and is the virtue of a girl that does not know what she would be at. A widow should be wiser' (1.1.200-202). And she goes on to offer Welldon both her 'fortune and person' (1.1.208).

Moreover, Lackitt sees herself not only as desirable, but as still desiring: as a widow she 'lacks' sexual fulfillment. After her night with Jack Stanmore, she is so pleased with his sexual performance that she believes her flushed countenance will betray her:

do I really look so cheerfully, so amiably? There's no such paint in the world as the natural glowing of a complexion. Let 'em find me out, if they please, poor creatures [other women], I pity 'em. They envy me, I'm sure, and would be glad to mend their looks upon the same occasion. (4.1.100-104)

She goes on to argue that young, sexually inexperienced women are too self-centered to understand the sexual needs of older women:

The young jill-flirting girls, forsooth, believe nobody must have a husband but themselves, but I would have 'em to know there are other things to be taken care of besides their green sickness [i.e. their virginity]. (4.1.105-108)

Her belief in her sexual potency extends also to the wisdom she has gained over the years: young women in their arrogance believe that in a world otherwise driven by economic striving their bodies are compensation enough. As she presents Welldon with £1000 in gold and jewels, she reminds him that 'there are comforts in marrying an elderly woman' that young women cannot offer (4.1.127). Lackitt knows that economic and sexual 'payment' go together: 'a young woman would have fancied she had paid you with her person or had done you the favor' (4.1.128-129). And Lackitt is not willing to buy herself just any husband - she uses her money to satisfy her interests and desires. She rebuffs Jack Stanmore, for instance: 'Lord! How can you be so troublesome? Nay, so unconscionable to think that every rich widow must throw herself away upon a young fellow that has nothing?' (1.2.73-76).

In spite of her understanding of sexual economics, Widow Lackitt is a straightforward comic figure, gullible despite her economic acumen, vulnerable to Welldon's looks and flattery despite her worldliness. Southerne's comic plot makes sure the audience is aware of Lackitt's situation. We know that Welldon is

Charlotte in men's clothing, and that Lackitt's desire for him will be used against her, a point emphasized by Lucy and Charlotte's asides. Lackitt teases Welldon about kissing like a 'younger brother,' 'as if you expected to be paid for't' (1.1.118), and enthuses 'we widows are commonly the better for younger brothers' (1.1.122-123). But Lucy observes, 'you won't be much better for him, I can tell you' (1.1.124-125). Later, when Lackitt solves the problem of a husband for Charlotte's sister Lucy by offering her son, Welldon soliloquizes:

The widow's in haste, I see. I thought I had laid a rub in the road about my sister, but she has stepped over that. She's making way for herself as fast as she can, but little thinks where she is going. I could tell her she is going to play the fool, but people don't love to hear of their faults. Besides, that is not my business at present. (2.1.69-74)

We are never allowed to forget that she is the butt of the comic plot, the dupe by which the others' fortunes are made.

We might see in Lackitt's comeuppance support for the argument that in this play Southerne advocates women's choices in marriage, and attacks the institution of marriage as akin to women's slavery. Lackitt's frank self-valuation and her cheerful payment to Welldon contrast painfully with the 'men's' cold assessment of her attractions and worth. Dressed in men's clothing, Welldon calls her an 'old, wanton witch,' although acknowledging a few moments earlier that when her fortune is added to her body, the package is 'not contemptible' (1.1.252, 1.1.240). The slave-ship captain explains his lack of interest in her solely with regard to her money (1.2.91). In these moments we know that although the Widow Lackitt believes she is authoring her own marriage plot, she is really a pawn in others' games. Such a misapprehension could result in tragedy, as we see in Behn's work.

If Southerne wished to make us examine women's lot within an oppressive patriarchal system, however, he chose an especially difficult genre within which to make his point. This half of the split-plot drama is a comedy, and there can be no tragic ending, even though Lackitt may be 'ruined' - pregnant with Jack Stanmore's child.¹¹ In the comic plot's conclusion, Lackitt good-naturedly resigns herself to Charlotte's trick (and to Jack Stanmore's sexual prowess) by saying, 'Nay, I can blame nobody but myself' (5.1.149), and we are allowed to laugh at her foolishness, whereas the widow figure in Behn's tale loses her status, her freedom and perhaps her life. At most Lackitt has lost a bit of pride and £1000.¹² She has gained, moreover, a husband, a wife for her booby son, and in Charlotte who has apparently 'done well,' a friend willing to 'live neighborly and lovingly together' (5.1.141-2). By making Lackitt a comic, rather than tragic, figure, Southerne carefully separates the fate of the British women from that of the slaves; in doing so, he invests the subplot with comedy and the main plot, that of Imoinda and Oroonoko, with tragedy.

Southerne ends his comic plot affirming Charlotte's superior cunning by giving her fortune, husband, and status in Surinam. Charlotte's achievement, then, can be seen as somewhat subversive; dressed in men's clothes she manipulates

others to determine her own fate, secure her own fortune, and choose her own husband. Pearson argues that through her cross dressing, Charlotte exercises agency and power by becoming a buyer in a patriarchal system she cannot overthrow, and she concludes by asserting that 'Southerne shows himself unusually sympathetic to the woman forced by a brutal society to adopt brutal methods to gain what she wants' (*Prostituted Muse* 115). We agree that Charlotte's disguise enables her to exercise more power than most women can, but we see Southerne's treatment of marriage and women's social status as much less radical. Rather than 'treat[ing] female characters with great tact and sympathy' (Pearson, *Prostituted Muse* 113), Southerne avoids constructing Surinam as a place of potential economic or political power for women outside of conventional marriage arrangements. In fact, his play reifies the 'marriage market' of London and limits women's choices. Unlike Behn's narrator in Surinam, the sole reason for the presence of Charlotte and Lucy in Surinam is 'a-husband-hunting' (1.1.4); here, there is no possibility of an independent existence outside of marriage. And, in fact, marriage spells the end of the kind of power Charlotte exerted in her days masquerading as Welldon.

Similarly, and perhaps more importantly, marriage brings an end to Widow Lackitt's independence and economic freedom. As Barbara J. Todd reminds us, widows, both real and fictional, posed a formidable threat to the patriarchy since they constituted the heads of their households. A widow, poor or propertied, controlled her own life and fortune (55). At the beginning of the play, Widow Lackitt clearly enjoys such control; confident in her fortune, she rebuffs Jack Stanmore and manages her own finances, as evidenced by her dealing in slaves (1.2). That she is willing to sacrifice this control for marriage might illustrate that Southerne is not as sympathetic to his women characters as his treatment of Charlotte would lead us to think.

Moreover, in the Widow's participation in the slave market we see the limitations of Southerne's seemingly radical treatment of parallel slave and marriage markets. The Widow suffers as a plantation slave owner because she cannot 'get' slaves, that is, she cannot impregnate her female slaves and because she, as the subsequent comic exchange shows, is herself a commodity, albeit not a very desirable one. The captain dismisses her because he has no need of her fortune:

I'm rich myself. She has nothing that I want. I have no leaks to stop. Old women are fortune-menders. I have made a good voyage and would reap the fruits of my labor. We plow the deep, my masters, but our harvest is on shore. I'm for a young woman. (1.2.90-94).

The scene presents doubled economies of flesh, suggesting a critique of women's status in this society, but the problem seems less an issue of fundamental inequalities and more one of access. While the widow struggles, Charlotte, as Welldon, is quite adept at negotiating the flesh trade. She acts as a marriage rather than a slave trader, even echoing the slave ship captain's words. The latter refuses

to accommodate the Widow's desire to have a slave lot of males and females mixed together, answering 'Let 'em mingle together and be damned, what care I? Would you have me pimp for the good of the plantation?' (1.2.19-20). And later Charlotte, after revealing her several plots to Stanmore, asks, 'Can you forgive me for pimping for your family?' (5.1.85). Although she asks for forgiveness, there are no ill effects from her participation in the market. The comic plot suggests that the degrading factor in the marriage market is not the subordinate position of women within marriage, but the similar treatment as chattel of white women before marriage and of Africans in slavery. As Laura J. Rosenthal argues, by accepting Southerne's equivalencies of women and slaves, readers must assume

his own erasure of black African women: Charlotte and Lucy (and for that matter, Imoinda) are not only women, but *white* women. Spoken to the African, enslaved Imoinda of Behn's novel, Charlotte's outcry against treating women as slaves would make no sense. The point, then, belongs less to feminism than to an argument for racial privilege. (42)

In other words, Charlotte's (and Southerne's) protest is not that women should not be slaves; it is simply that white women should not be.

Additionally, the radicalism of Southerne's equation of marriage and slave markets comes under scrutiny in the last act of the play. There, the women of the comic subplot are transformed into women of feeling, urging the white patriarchy to be kind to Oroonoko. Their focus, then, even Charlotte's, becomes centered on their sentimental attachment to the black hero rather than their own oppressed position in that same patriarchy. Once they are all comfortably married, these women are no longer concerned with their status as 'slaves.' Jane Spencer even speculates that the success of Southerne's play with female theatergoers lay not in their identification with the so-called feminist Charlotte Welldon, but instead with their sentimental response to the tragedy of the African lovers; she argues that as the Welldons and Lackitt become sympathetic to the plight of Oroonoko, so does the audience (237). Thus, Spencer believes that the play taught a 'manifestation of femininity that contemporaries recommended to ladies of the audience' (237). This 'manifestation of femininity' seems a far cry from the subversive feminist protest that has often been attributed to Southerne's play.

***

Although we have been arguing that Southerne adheres to the conventions of the Restoration stage by erasing Behn's West African story line, substituting his comic plot and inserting the stock figure of the widow, we can find the seeds of his revision contained in Behn's original. Behn, too, adopts dramatic conventions to structure her prose fiction, an understandable strategy given her experience with play writing.¹³ One of the most evident of these conventions is the pairing of

upper- and lower-class characters in Surinam. On the Restoration stage, upper-class characters often have comic lower-class counterparts. Usually servants, these play a critical role in the heroes' ultimate successes in love and fortune. Congreve's *Way of the World*, for example, features Waitwell and Foible as servants of Mirabell and Lady Wishfort. We can see this dramatic convention being played out in the West African portion of Behn's narrative, too. Oroonoko and Imoinda have counterparts in Aboan and Onahal. Though neither of these characters is strictly 'servant' to the royal pair, both are lower in the Coramantien social order than their royal counterparts. Onahal is 'one of the Cast-Mistresses of the old King,'¹⁴ meaning that she simultaneously teaches Imoinda and is also strangely subservient to the current chosen wife of the king. Aboan, on the other hand, enjoys no such authority over Oroonoko; he is clearly subservient to the royal prince.¹⁵ Like Waitwell and Foible with Mirabell and Millamant, Onahal and Aboan are instrumental in helping Oroonoko and Imoinda consummate their love. Unlike the traditional 'lower-class' counterpart, however, neither Aboan nor Onahal serves as comic relief. Yet, as we will see, Behn consciously sets up humorous potential with Onahal, only to thwart this latent comedy with a tragedy that has been neglected by scholarly commentaries.

Behn's presentation of Onahal, especially in her relationship with Aboan, seems continually on the edge of the comic. Onahal seems to fit perfectly into the role of the aging widow figure so prominent on the Restoration stage. First, Behn describes Onahal as 'a former old Wife of the King's [sic]' (51), which perhaps indicates her age as well as her widow-like status. Behn further underscores Onahal's age and fading beauty when she juxtaposes Onahal with the object of her affections, the youthful and handsome Aboan:

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* (52).

Behn hints at humor with the descriptor 'antiquated,' but she quickly imbues Onahal with more important qualities: '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*' (52). Onahal's internal qualities shine through - her sense and wit are her most attractive attributes, and it is these qualities that Aboan admires the most. So although Behn's description suggests Onahal's potential as a comic character, Behn quickly defuses our impulse to laugh.

Behn also writes Onahal as full of sexual desire, another characteristic typical of the Restoration widow figure, and one that Southerne's Lackitt certainly shares. In her relationship with Aboan, Onahal is figured as the pursuer. For instance, Aboan begins to court her with sighs and 'soft' eyes (52). His actions seem modest and guarded, though, when compared to Onahal's almost predatory response:

He had also observ'd that she had given him Glances more tender and inviting, than she had done to others of his Quality: And now, when he saw that her Favour cou'd so absolutely oblige the Prince, he fail'd not to sigh in her Ear, and to look with Eyes all soft upon her, and give her Hope that she had made some Impressions on his Heart. He found her pleas'd at this, and making a thousand Advances to him. (52)

Similarly, Onahal's desire outstrips Aboan's. When Oroonoko asks Aboan to woo Onahal in order to help him see Imoinda, he implores Aboan to 'engage her entirely; which he cou'd not fail to do, if he comply'd with *her* Desires' (53, emphasis ours). Onahal's desires inspire her with cleverness and ingenuity; she contrives a way to admit Aboan and Oroonoko to the Otan, reassuring Aboan of her intelligence and creativity: '*Oh! Do not fear a Woman's Invention, when Love sets her a-thinking*' (54). The fulfillment of Onahal's 'invention' provides Behn with what could be the most promising comic moment in the text. After sneaking Oroonoko and Aboan into the Otan,

Onahal led the Prince to the Apartment of *Imoinda*; who, not knowing anything of her Happiness, was laid in Bed. But *Onahal* only left him in her Chamber, to make the best of his Opportunity, and took her dear *Aboan* to her own; where he shew'd the height of Complaisance for his Prince, when, to give him an Opportunity, he suffer'd himself to be caress'd in Bed by *Onahal*. (55-6)

The comedic potential here, especially for the stage, is limitless. An actor might opt for the easy laugh by positioning his Aboan on his back, staring idly at the ceiling, as Onahal lasciviously (if arthritically) devours him. Behn's language itself seems to beg for our laughter. The young, handsome Aboan 'suffer[s] himself to be caress'd by the withering Onahal; his participation is not active, but passive, as he shows the 'height of Complaisance for his Prince.'¹⁶ Onahal's sexual prowess might, under other circumstances, provide opportunity for comedy; certainly the Widow Lackitt's unabashed pursuit of Welldon is ridiculed in Southerne's play. Here, though, Behn fails to deliver the punch line; although we are tempted to laugh at Onahal's pursuit, in the end we do not.

One explanation for Behn's unwillingness to make Onahal's sexuality comic might come from Behn's personal history and her own status as a woman writer. Janet Todd suggests that as she wrote *Oroonoko*, Behn was a widow or perhaps, even, an abandoned wife.¹⁷ Behn also experienced the pain of unrequited love and was subject to romantic/sexual manipulation. She pursued a romantic relationship with John Hoyle, a violent and narcissistic lawyer who seemed to delight in toying with Behn's affections. Throughout their tumultuous affair, Hoyle controlled the relationship, bringing Behn running when he desired her attentions and casting her aside when he did not.¹⁸ Moreover, whatever her personal experiences, women's writings in general were often labeled 'obscene' (Pearson, *Prostituted Muse* 11), and Behn's 1684 volume *Poems on Several Occasions*, with its emphasis on seduction and sexuality, most likely qualified for this label in many readers' eyes.

The charges against Behn extended to her personal reputation. Male writers accused her of having loose sexual morals, as Pope's satirical words make clear: 'The stage how loosely does Astrea tread, / Who fairly puts all Characters to bed' (290-91). As Janet Todd notes, Behn herself at times seems to invite such accusations; in her popular comedy, *The Rover*, Behn names the prostitute Angellica Bianca, and thus shares initials with the character (12).¹⁹ Behn's already-tenuous reputation was compounded by the fact that she, like Onahal, was a widow; as a writer and as a widow, she threatened the power of the patriarchal world. Behn, then, may have avoided mocking Onahal because ridiculing an older, single woman imputed to have rapacious sexual desires may have hit too close to home.

Another reason we might hesitate to laugh at Onahal inheres in the tension Behn creates between Onahal as pursuer and Onahal as pawn. Onahal believes that she is masterminding a plot to win the youthful and handsome Aboan. Despite her age and the 'decays in her face,' she retains an internal beauty and self-confidence that enable her to admonish Aboan:

Nor wou'd I have you believe, that because I am the abandoned Mistress of a King, I esteem my self altogether divested of Charms. No, Aboan; I have still a Rest of Beauty enough engaging, and have learn'd to please too well, not to be desirable. I can have Lovers still, but will have none but Aboan. (53-4).

Like Lackitt, Onahal recognizes that her age and experience have given her 'Charms' that younger women do not have. Additionally, she demonstrates a judicious knowledge of her desirability. As did Lackitt, Onahal understands the economies of sex, and proves this understanding by giving Aboan 'two large Pearls' from her ears (54). That Onahal thinks the seduction is her doing is evident when Behn writes that she is 'wholly transported with Joy, for having subdu'd the finest of all the King's Subjects to her Desires' (54). Behn's choice of 'subdued' here is also important as we read of Onahal's stereotypically masculine behavior; surely we are to make the connection between Onahal's 'thousand Advances' (52) and her success at 'subduing' Aboan. Clearly, Onahal believes herself in control of this seduction.

Moreover, Onahal's decision to forward her own romantic desires by aiding Imoinda and Oroonoko is a rejection of her assigned place within the economy of the Otan. No longer a sexual partner for the king, her duties include instructing the king's new wives in the 'wanton Arts of love' (52). Like Widow Lackitt in Southerne's play, she could be said to trade in flesh; both women, despite their racial differences, in some way exploit others. At the other extreme, however, we must see both Onahal and Widow Lackitt as exploited themselves. After all, Onahal was once herself a new bride who was 'trained' by the older ones. And the Widow, while able to trade in slaves, is also oppressed by virtue of being a female owner - her complaints of unfair treatment go unheeded (1.2). The difference between the characters - and it is an important one - is that Onahal herself belongs

to the king. Whereas Southerne makes Lackitt's subjection to a marriage/slave market metaphorical, for Onahal it is quite literal. And ultimately, their similarities founder on their generic fate. While we have seen that Lackitt emerges relatively unscathed in Southerne's comic plot, the penalty for trying to exert even a limited amount of influence or control is much more severe for Onahal in Behn's tragic story.

As Onahal spins her romantic plot, readers perceive another plot in which she is a mere pawn. After the king confines Imoinda to the Otan, Oroonoko entreats Aboan to seduce Onahal so that she will help the prince gain access to his beloved. All the while Onahal is relishing her triumph, Aboan and Oroonoko are plotting theirs: 'Aboan fail'd not that Night to tell the Prince of his Success, and how advantageous the Service of *Onahal* might be to his Amour with *Imoinda*. The Prince was overjoy'd with this good News' (53). Restoration comedies encourage playgoers to snicker at the foolish old woman and root for the princely hero to dupe her.²⁰ Indeed, as we have argued, Southerne's play reminds the audience regularly that Lackitt is the dupe of Welldon's own plot, and playgoers were surely meant to root for Welldon to best the foolish Lackitt. Behn, however, causes us to question any easy allegiance to the prince and his servant. The alliance between Oroonoko and Aboan turns almost sinister when we realize what is at stake for Onahal: '*For then* (said the Prince) *Her life lying at your Mercy, she must grant you the Request you make in my Behalf*' (53). Here Behn reminds us of the grave danger for Onahal if her dalliance with Aboan is discovered by the king - her very life, not merely her fortune or her pride, is at stake.

Onahal's subsequent abrupt disappearance from the text underscores her role as a pawn of Oroonoko's machinations. Unlike Widow Lackitt, who resigns herself to her 'fate' (a husband and a new-found female friend) and lives happily ever after, Onahal vanishes from the text, signaling a discursive and possibly a literal death. Her disappearance might also highlight a lesson Behn wants to teach about female alliances. Although Onahal certainly had self-serving reasons to pursue Aboan, her pursuit ultimately allies her with Imoinda. Onahal serves as a go-between for the royal lovers, several times throughout the text reassuring Oroonoko of Imoinda's love (51, 57). And when the king questions his two wives, Onahal falls prostrate with Imoinda to corroborate her story that Oroonoko 'ravish'd' her (57). Of course, Onahal is trying to protect herself, but Behn nevertheless suggests the importance - as well as the risk - of female alliances, whether driven by affection, loyalty, or self-preservation.

This connection between Onahal and Imoinda becomes even more significant when we remember the petty jealousy of the other older wives:

'twas these (now past their Beauty) that were made Guardians, or Governants to the new, and the young Ones; and whose Business it was, to teach them all those wanton Arts of Love, with which they prevail'd and charm'd heretofore in their Turn; and who now treated the triumphing happy Ones with all the Severity, as to Liberty and Freedom, that was possible, in revenge of those Honours they rob them of; envying them those

Satisfactions, those Gallantries and Presents, that were once made to themselves, while Youth and Beauty lasted, and which they now saw pass regardless by, and pay'd only to the Bloomings . . . These abandon'd Ladies therefore endeavour to revenge all the Despights, and Decays of Time on these flourishing happy Ones. (52)

Otan politics foreground the 'feminine' qualities of jealousy and pettiness and preclude the very idea of female alliances. Onahal, however, defies such stereotypes by helping Imoinda. Yet this loyalty is cruelly rewarded: the king orders Onahal and Imoinda to 'be both sold off, as Slaves, to another Country, either *Christian*, or *Heathen*; 'twas no matter where.' The punishment is a 'Sentence, worse than Death' (58). Later, we learn just how devastating Onahal's enslavement would have seemed to a wife of many years. Imoinda submits to Oroonoko's knife because 'when a Man finds any occasion to quit his Wife, if he love her, she dyes by his Hand; if not, he sells her, or suffers some other to kill her' (95). Onahal was not even afforded the dubious respect of a quick death. While the punishment was aimed primarily at Imoinda, surely it rankled more deeply for Onahal, who had been the king's wife for much longer. In addition, although the king later regrets his decision to sell Imoinda, he never once mentions Onahal's fate. The cast-mistress, once the favored wife, is now actually cast off, punished for being an accomplice to Imoinda's happiness. The lesson Behn seems to be teaching is that women's alliances cannot go unpunished in a male-dominated world.

Of course, Southerne's play also seems to teach the impossibility of female alliances. Pearson writes that 'in the play's divided worlds, it is impossible for women to unite to combat the forces of patriarchy and imperialism. The slave-women envy and mock Imoinda, Welldon tricks Mrs. Lackitt' (*Prostituted Muse* 115). While we agree that this interpretation shapes Southerne's presentation in part, as we have argued any potentially radical critique of women's status is ultimately contained by Southerne's choice of genre: the women who inhabit the comic plot of the play do little more than support the status quo, even if they do go about it in an unusual way. The Widow, Lucy and Charlotte finally endorse the conservative standard of marriage, despite the potential reversal of social and economic conditions afforded in the New World. Though Lucy and Charlotte seemingly turn the patriarchal standard on its ear by commodifying men as oranges in Act 1, by the end of Act 5 they have restored these standards by securing husbands and taking their prescribed place in the social hierarchy.²¹ Within the workings of this comic plot, then, the impossibility of female alliances does not seem to be universally disadvantageous to women, as it does in Behn's work. Moreover, in the comic subplot at least, female alliances are thwarted by the women themselves, who maneuver around and through one another to achieve their desired marriages. While Behn is not so idealistic as to suggest that her female characters are not susceptible to the same motives - Onahal uses Imoinda, after all, to win Aboan - it is male power, not female wiles, that disrupts alliances.

Keeping Behn's treatment of female alliances in mind, Onahal's actions and fate in the first part of the story can offer us insight into the second part, set in Surinam, in which the narrator assumes some of Onahal's functions. Like Onahal in Coramantien, the narrator occupies a unique place in the social order of colonial Surinam. She has come to the colony because her father had been appointed 'Lieutenant-General of six and thirty Islands, besides the Continent of Surinam' (76), but he died at sea and never took office. So, while the narrator might have occupied a subordinate, if privileged, position as the daughter of a high-ranking official, she finds herself instead in a curiously independent state. Although the narrator mentions her mother and siblings, her story does not describe any real relationship with them, and she is fairly free to act as she chooses. Unmarried, wealthy, given the 'best House' in Surinam - she tells Lord Maitland in her dedicatory letter that 'I had none above me in that Country' (37) - she seemingly has freedom of thought, movement and activity. In a sense, the narrator occupies the same role in Surinam that Onahal did in Coramantien: both enjoy relative freedom while still living in a patriarchal society.

Additionally, we can see similarities between Onahal's role in the Otan and the narrator's in Surinam. Both women educate newcomers in their respective societies; the narrator instructs Imoinda and Oroonoko as Onahal instructed Imoinda.²² Onahal as Imoinda's educator exercises power over the younger woman, giving Onahal greater freedom in the Otan, yet this power perpetuates the patriarchal system to which she herself is subjected. Similarly, the narrator has a measure of authority over the couple that ultimately supports the colonial power that enslaves them and that circumscribes her own life. The ambivalence of the characters' relations to one another and to the colonial hierarchy in which they reside stems from their mutual affection. The narrator enjoys intimacies and experiences with the royal couple well outside the norm of most white, colonial women in Surinam. When the narrator describes her relationship with Imoinda in particular, the echoes of Onahal's role within the Otan are clear. The narrator undertakes to instruct Imoinda in 'all the pretty Works that I was Mistress off [sic]; and telling her Stories of Nuns' (74), an education that, while directed toward chastity and not the 'wanton Arts' of the Otan, nevertheless is designed to fit Imoinda to the orthodox gender roles of the narrator's society. Thus the narrator, like Onahal, fits Imoinda to her new position and increases her economic and sexual value. Like Onahal's interest in Aboan, the narrator's friendliness and fascination with Oroonoko lead to moments of cross-gender interaction. While she tells Imoinda 'pretty' stories, she shares 'the Lives of Romans, and great Men' (74) with Oroonoko; such classical learning was usually reserved for men in Restoration London.²³ Additionally, the narrator accompanies Oroonoko on tiger-hunting adventures and visits to Indian villages, surpassing other planters, men and women, with her daring spirit.

At this point the careful reader of the first part of Behn's narrative may uneasily recall Onahal's fate after she linked herself to Imoinda, and this dis-ease should deepen upon reading of the narrator's increasingly intimate friendship with

Oroonoko and Imoinda, an intimacy encouraged and exploited by the colony's white planters:

I was oblig'd, by some Persons, who fear'd a Mutiny (which is very Fatal sometimes in those Colonies, that abound so with Slaves, that they exceed the Whites in vast Numbers) to discourse with Caesar, and to give him all the Satisfaction I possibly cou'd' (74).

The narrator's ready acquiescence to the planters' plot to distract and placate Oroonoko indicates her privileged status over him by virtue of her race. She is invested with power over Oroonoko, albeit a power circumscribed by the colonial system within which they both are enmeshed, and like Onahal within the Otan, she is free to exercise that power only within certain bounds.

Her extraordinary intimacy with Oroonoko, enabled by the indulgence of the colonial planters who are using her to control their slaves, is thus fraught with ambiguities stemming from race, gender and power. How are we to read, for instance, Oroonoko's affectionate term for the narrator: '*Great Mistress*' (74)? This epithet, coming as it does after a lengthy description of the mutual interests and activities of the narrator and couple, implies a romantically-inclined relationship. It suggests the chivalric addresses of the early modern lover to the 'mistress' of his heart. The narrator herself understands her designation as 'mistress' as pertaining to her powers of persuasion: 'and indeed, my Word wou'd go a great way with him' (74).²⁴ The narrator prides herself on Oroonoko's attachment to her. He lays the spoils of his tiger hunt at her feet (78), and Oroonoko's 'many fine Discourses; of Accidents in War, and Strange Escapes' (79) are surely meant to suggest Othello's addresses to Desdemona.²⁵ It is a short leap from the narrator's descriptions of her activities and adventures with Oroonoko to a reading of their relationship as courtship. And yet, of course, the story precludes any such erotic attachment. The narrator is deeply interested in the romance and marriage of Imoinda and Oroonoko. Moreover, given Surinam's twinned economies of marriage and slavery, it would be unthinkable for an English woman to indulge a sexual interest in an African slave. The term '*Great Mistress*' cannot fail to remind the reader of Oroonoko's enslavement, and of course he comes to call her 'mistress' in the course of her spying on him on behalf of the colonial planters. She amuses and interests him with stories and excursions in order to divert him from plots of escape and revenge. It is at this point that many readers of the story stumble. How is it that this narrator, seemingly so interested in and affectionate toward Oroonoko and Imoinda, can betray them? How is it, as she herself admits, 'though I had none above me in that Country, yet I wanted power to preserve this Great Man' (37)?²⁶

Here, it seems, the West African storyline must be taken into account. Whereas Behn's narrator told Oroonoko-*cum*-Caesar tales of great Roman lives, and so perhaps inspired (or intensified) his heroic resistance to slavery, Oroonoko has told the narrator a tragic story of Onahal, a woman caught between her desires and the realities of an economy driven by marriage and slavery. The West African story warns readers and the narrator herself as she hears the story that women who

try to work together risk reprisals. Moreover, if older women who are given the responsibility in this patriarchal kingdom of controlling younger women and initiating them in their sexual duties challenge that order by seizing sexual pleasure for themselves or helping younger women to fulfill their own sexual desires, they will be punished.²⁷ Their plans will fail, their limited power will be stripped from them, and they will be erased. In the first part of her story, as Behn describes Onahal and her fate, she asserts the futility of women's alliances and illustrates the dangers inherent in their attempts to author their own stories within patriarchy. While men such as the king may be sexually impotent, women are politically, even personally, powerless.

Given this object lesson in sex and power, it is no wonder that in the second part, the Surinam half of the story, the narrator refuses to save Oroonoko and allows Imoinda to be sacrificed with scarcely a murmur. Towards the end of the narrative, then, when Oroonoko and Imoinda would most benefit from her help, she makes her choice, abjuring even her limited authority in favor of a protective, implicit alliance with the more powerful colonizing forces. Her withdrawal should not be too surprising to a reader who has attended carefully to the lessons on the sexual and marital economies written into the early part of the narrative. Whatever her freedom of movement and of association before Oroonoko's rebellion, the patriarchy will not brook her interference in its market-driven control over slavery, sex, marriage and reproduction.²⁸ Should she try to intervene, the narrative suggests that she would at best be unsuccessful - as Trefry, a white male planter is - and at worst, be severely punished - as Onahal is.

The slave couple is moved to rebellion, finally, because Imoinda becomes pregnant, and Oroonoko fears that the colonists would 'delay him till the time of his Wives delivery, and make a Slave of that too, For all the Breed is theirs to whom the Parents belong' (74). Oroonoko and Imoinda understand rightly that their value to their colonial masters increases as they produce children. And so, while Oroonoko allowed himself to be diverted by the narrator from his unhappiness for a time, his forbearance ends when 'Imoinda began to show she was with Child . . . and [he] believ'd, if it were so hard to gain the Liberty of Two, 'twou'd be more difficult to get that for Three' (85). He determines to escape, and convinces the other slaves of the colony to go with him. At this point, the narrator removes herself from the main action of the plot. Despite her previous friendship and Oroonoko's assurance of her safety,

We were possess'd with extream Fear, which no perswasions cou'd Dissipate, that he wou'd secure himself till Night; and then, that he wou'd come down and Cut all our Throats. This apprehension made all the Females of us fly down the River. (92)

Here the previously intrepid narrator occupies the role of powerless and fearful female. And once she flees with the other women, Oroonoko is captured and 'Whipt like a common *Slave*' (92).

Why does the narrator have such an extreme reaction? Until this moment, she had shown no fear of Oroonoko, and had touted their mutual respect. Additionally, she had maintained that she had influence over Oroonoko, and she even suggests that she might have been able to help him had she remained on the scene, but her suggestion is hesitant, equivocal: 'For I suppose I had Authority and Interest enough there, had I suspected any such thing, to have prevented it' (92). She merely 'supposes' rather than affirming absolutely, perhaps because she remembers the lesson of Onahal. The reality is, of course, that because the male slave owners were intent on protecting the intertwined sexual and slave economies as embodied by the slave couple and their unborn child,²⁹ the narrator's status as woman here trumps her status as white. She is rendered powerless to assist others in these economies by her gender and not even her whiteness can overcome this liability. While she should have suspected such treachery on the part of the white men, any attempt to step in and save Oroonoko and Imoinda would be futile, perhaps even fatal, or so Onahal's story suggests to the attentive reader. And given how precisely she retells that story years later, it seems the narrator learned her lessons well. Whatever the emotions or reasons that lie beneath her decision not to intervene, as a woman, Behn's narrator cannot form a successful alliance with Imoinda or with Oroonoko because her power, though more than that of the average woman in the colony, is nevertheless circumscribed by her situation in patriarchal, imperialist Surinam, a situation emphasized by her second withdrawal just before Oroonoko's execution, and the inability of the sympathetic women who do witness his murder to intervene.³⁰

In all these twists and turns of fate, Imoinda is the character who is the most abused, and her death brings together the two halves of Behn's plot, connecting the sexual economy of the royal Otan with that of the colonial slave cabin. Oroonoko decides to sacrifice Imoinda primarily because he can't bear to think of her being raped by the planters. His objection is not a moral absolute; earlier in the text he seems fairly sanguine about the planters' ability to sexually abuse their female slaves. Before he realizes that the slave girl 'Clemene' is actually Imoinda, he questions why his friend and planter Trefry does not take by force what she refuses to grant him:

I do not wonder . . . that Clemene shou'd refuse Slaves, being as you say so Beautiful, but wonder how she escapes thos who can entertain her as you can do; or why, being your Slave, you do not oblige her to yield. (71)

At issue in Oroonoko's decision is not Imoinda's desire or even her chastity, but rather that Imoinda's physical vulnerability weakens his resolve to wreak revenge upon the English colonists who whipped him, a reminder once again of Imoinda's doubly subjected status as slave and wife.

That the narrator regrets her complicity, whether active or passive, with the colonial authorities is illustrated by the last lines of the narrative, which emphasize her lingering attachment to Oroonoko and her guilt over the couple's fate: 'Thus Dy'd this Great Man; worthy of a better Fate, and a more sublime Wit than mine, to

write his Praise' (100). And despite her great admiration for and deep attachment to Oroonoko, the narrator reserves the last word of the text not for the husband, but for the wife he killed in obedience to the Otan rules that had forced her into slavery in the first place:

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*. (100)

By the end of the narrative, the narrator has realized that though she cannot physically rescue Oroonoko and Imoinda, she can add their stories to those of the 'Romans, and great Men' (74) that so fascinated her royal friend. She has attempted to form a rhetorical alliance with both Oroonoko and Imoinda (and even Onahal) by retelling their stories, ensuring them long literary lives if short actual ones.

It is at this point in the narrative that the line between Behn's narrator and Behn herself is most blurred. If there are parallels between Onahal and Behn in the first part of the narrative, these are carried over and transformed into closer ties between the narrator and author, so much so, that the question of the narrative's autobiographical content is perennially debated.³¹ Thus, we can understand the hints of the narrator's erotic interest in Oroonoko, transformed into an intellectual connection and friendship, as Behn's representation of her own personal and professional reputation, which vacillated between sexual scandal and authorial recognition. The 'reputation' of the narrator's pen is that of Behn's own and cements her fame even as it assures Oroonoko and his bride a discursive afterlife. We see this attempt to write the life of the 'royal slave,' however, not as a triumphant victory over the patriarchy, but instead as a compensatory, partial resolution to the problems of gender, race and power that drive the narrative's plot; the narrator writes their stories only because she was unable to save their lives. Her narrative power, then, serves to draw attention to the lack of political power women wield - no matter their racial or political status - whether in Coramantien, Surinam, or Restoration London.³²

Oroonoko and Imoinda die, of course, in Southerne's play too, and, as in Behn's narrative, Southerne's sympathetic women characters are unable to help them. But there is a crucial difference between Behn's Onahal and narrator and Southerne's interpolated characters. Behn's women are from the first fully implicated in the tragedy of the slave couple, whereas, as we have discussed, Southerne's Charlotte Welldon - a masculinized spinner of plots, his 'mock Behn' (Vermillion 33) and his oversexed Widow Lackitt, the petty butt of jokes - are isolated in their separate, comic plot. In this way, Southerne reduces Behn's innovative and complicated experiment in prose fiction to a standard recipe for a successful split-plot drama. His domestic metaphor for female narrative control (women spinning plots) functions only so long as they do so in order to avoid becoming spinsters. He allows them to control their stories, but only so long as

women (and women authors) use their storytelling to negotiate the marriage market and gain a husband, not to enter the literary market and gain fame or fortune.

This contrast between Southerne and Behn enables us to see more clearly the radical nature of Behn's work and her difficult position as a female author in Restoration London. In both *Coramantien* and *Surinam*, she creates the same patriarchal society that Southerne represents in his *Surinam*. In both works, female alliances are ultimately contained by the masculine power structure. For Southerne, though, challenges to the sexual economy that make such alliances dangerous constitute a joke, and critics have misread the joke as masking an argument for female agency in Charlotte/Welldon's actions. But, as another look at Behn's story as well as her biography tell us, such challenges can lead to tragedy (as for Onahal), to guilt-ridden survival (as for the narrator), or to marginalization in the literary world (as for Behn). Indeed, as we have seen, Behn was constantly being punished for writing and narrating; her success was always qualified by the knowledge that she was never truly accepted as an equal in the male-dominated literary world. The transformation of Behn's narrator from an active, intrepid participant to a passive, powerless observer becomes more understandable then, given the lessons Behn teaches about sexuality and power in the West African sequence. The narrator's refusal to help Oroonoko and Imoinda in the final scenes leads to their tragedy but avoids hers. Her decision is an act of self-preservation that, however unforgivable a betrayal, is, at least understandable in a world that punishes women for following their own desires, for spinning their own plots.

Notes:

¹ For the former, see especially Mary Vermillion, 'Buried Heroism: Critiques of Female Authorship in Southerne's Adaptation of Behn's *Oroonoko*.' For the latter, see Joyce Green MacDonald, 'The Disappearing African Woman: Imoinda in *Oroonoko* after Behn.'

² Lady Wishfort in William Congreve's *Way of the World* represents one of the most famous of these widows, but stereotypical widow figures crowd the Restoration stage. For further information on the stereotype and its popularity, see Barbara J. Todd's 'The Remarrying Widow: A Stereotype Reconsidered' and Jon Lance Bacon's 'Wives, Widows and Writings in Restoration Comedy.'

³ Ann Messenger argues that Southerne's comic subplot - in which, as she describes it, the widow has such a prominent role - 'has no counterpart in Mrs. Behn's novel, which is devoted entirely to the tragic story of Oroonoko' (63). One possible source for Southerne's Widow is, of course, Behn's own Widow Ranter from her posthumously-produced play of the same name. Laura J. Rosenthal and Jane Spencer, for example, argue that Southerne probably borrowed from Behn's Widow Ranter in his creation of both Widow Lackitt and the cross-dressing Charlotte Welldon, though he never admits to such borrowings (Rosenthal 101; Spencer 130). Spencer further speculates that Southerne may have admitted to borrowing from Behn's prose fiction, but not from her plays, because he wanted to avoid

being labeled a playwright 'in the tradition of Behn' (134). Regardless of Southerne's motivation, the Widow Lackitt does resemble Behn's Ranter in her outspokenness, sexual desire, and status as wealthy widow.

⁴ While Onahal is not technically a 'widow,' as Lackitt is, her situation nonetheless resembles a widow's. She is 'married' to the king, but her place as favored wife is superseded by each new wife. Like a widow's in Restoration England, Onahal's status in the Otan is complicated. She enjoys some autonomy, but ultimately she is restrained by the patriarchal power of the king. We use the term 'widow,' then, to suggest that Onahal's position in Coramantien in many ways corresponds to a widow's position in England.

⁵ See George Guffey for a discussion of Behn's mirroring of Coramantien and Restoration politics and societies.

⁶ See, for instance, Maximillian E. Novak and David Stuart Rodes's Introduction to Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko*.

⁷ One could certainly argue that Southerne added his comic plot simply out of generic considerations. Multi-plot plays have enjoyed a long history on the English stage, and were popularized by Shakespeare, John Fletcher, and Ben Jonson, among others. Restoration playwrights capitalized on the vogue of the split-plot tragicomedy, as evidenced by John Dryden's and Southerne's successes with it; see Robert D. Hume, *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century* (209-213). Behn herself relied on this structure for a few of her plays, including her first, *The Forced Marriage*, and her last, posthumously-performed play, *The Widow Ranter: or, the History of Bacon in Virginia* (1689). In terms of genre, then, Southerne's choice seems logical - he was satisfying the taste of his market. One could argue, too, that Behn was satisfying the taste of a new market of readers - the rising novel-reading public. William Spengemann writes that with the merging of the 'True Relation' and romance genres, Behn was able to 'bridge the gulf between her feudal paradise and the progressive "new England" of her intended audience' (389). Capitalizing on audience demand, then, probably played a role in both authors' genre choices.

⁸ Thomas Southerne, *Oroonoko*, Ed. Maximillian E. Novak and David Stuart Rodes, 4. All references to Southerne's play come from this edition. Readers who have concentrated on Behn's and Southerne's generic choices have argued that the decisions turn on their critiques of social norms. See Rachel K. Carnell's 'Subverting Tragic Conventions: Aphra Behn's Turn to the Novel,' Paula Backscheider's *Spectacular Politics*, and Rose Zimbardo's 'Aphra Behn: A Dramatist in Search of the Novel.'

⁹ For the former view, see Julia Rich, 'Heroic Tragedy in Southerne's *Oroonoko*'; for the latter, Vermillion.

¹⁰ Throughout, we will use the name 'Charlotte' to refer to the character acting as herself and 'Welldon' to indicate speeches and actions performed when in men's clothing.

¹¹ Michael Cohen argues that 'Congreve's wry epilogue to *Oroonoko* reminds us of his own practice: it is perhaps better to try to influence this society by depicting its follies from within rather than by presenting it with an inimitable heroic model for admiration' (17). Perhaps Southerne is attempting some such strategy, but again, the end result for the widow is to imply that 'she liked it,' liked the duplicity and sexual trickery or at least the results of such trickery. Since all the women in the subplot are so much better off in the end, the conclusion undercuts the possible critique.

¹² Rosenthal also connects the Widow's role in the comic plot to her attempt 'to inhabit the masculine position of owner and sexual subject without the excuse of a temporary drag role' (97).

¹³ Kristiaan P. Aercke contends that much 17th-century prose fiction borrowed theater techniques in her 'Theatrical Background in English Novels of the Seventeenth Century.' Concentrating primarily on Behn's *Oroonoko*, Aercke argues that the introduction of perspective on the stage is mirrored in the prose fiction of the day. In *Oroonoko*, for example, the reader witnesses concurrent actions in the foreground and background during the Otan scene (126). Further evidence that early modern prose writers were drawing from stage techniques comes from Congreve's *Incognita*. In it, Congreve explains that he 'resolved. . . to imitate dramattick writing, namely in the design, contexture and result of the plot' (121).

¹⁴ Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko*, Ed. Catherine Gallagher, 52. All references to Behn's *Oroonoko* come from this edition.

¹⁵ The one possible exception to Aboan's inferior status comes on the battlefield, when a lovesick Oroonoko refuses to take command and Aboan serves as General for the day. However, despite Aboan's 'Courage, which the Day gain'd him immortal Glory,' he fails to rally the troops, and Oroonoko eventually steps in to '[inspire] all the rest with new Courage, and new Order' (60, 61).

¹⁶ The connections between this scene and the Restoration stage, along with its more unsavory aspects, are reinforced by Moira Ferguson's discussion of Oroonoko's 'ravishment' of Imoinda, which Aboan's 'complaisance' brings about. As Ferguson notes, Oroonoko, in his scene with Imoinda, has 'a hint of a Restoration rake about him' (8).

¹⁷ The identity of Behn's husband remains an historical mystery, but Janet Todd settles on one Johan Behn, a sea-faring merchant Behn possibly met on her return from Surinam. Their marriage was short (Johan disappears by 1666), though historical records do not indicate if he died (possibly from the plague outbreak in 1666) or merely abandoned Behn. For more information, see Todd's *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn*, esp. 67-75.

¹⁸ Todd's *Secret Life* explores this relationship in greater detail, esp. 174-84.

¹⁹ Behn's motivation for such a parallel is ambiguous, however. In her postscript to *The Rover*, Behn explicitly links playwright to prostitute: '. . . I, vainly proud of my judgment, hang out the sign of Angellica . . . to give notice where a great part of the wit dwelt' (*The Rover*, 248). While she may be asserting that prostitutes and women playwrights share a certain amount of wit and power that threatens the male hierarchy, she simultaneously leaves herself open to criticism that could damn her personally and professionally. Catherine Gallagher, however, maintains that Behn consciously capitalizes on this poetess-whore analogy, merely exaggerating the current idea that writers become authors by virtue of being sold (*Nobody's Story* 14).

²⁰ Lady Wishfort once again comes to mind.

²¹ Pearson disagrees. She argues that, despite the betrayal of other women, Charlotte at least overcomes the cycle of trickery and betrayal in her marriage to Stanmore, which Pearson characterizes as 'transcend[ing] the world's ethic of barter and betrayal, and [forming a union of equals]' (*Prostituted Muse* 115). Given the conservative social order that is the setting for this play, though, a union of equals seems quite impossible.

²² As Robert Erickson argues, the narrator (whom he terms 'Mistress Behn' in order to distinguish her from the author Aphra Behn) 'is now, at the time of writing, in a position somewhat analogous to that of Onahal, the 'decayed Beauty' who instructed the young concubines. . . . The decayed beauty Mistress Behn now writes the narrative of how as a younger woman she helped to determine the outcome of [Oroonoko's and Imoinda's] lives' (209).

²³ Behn's own reputation as a translator of Latin (which she did not read) earned her the dubious epithet of 'our blind Translatress Behn' for her part in Dryden's edition of Ovid's

Heroides. In fact, despite her limited linguistic knowledge, Behn apparently had no trouble revising the myth of Apollo and Daphne with a feminist twist when Nahum Tate asked her to contribute to a translation of Cowley's Latin poem, *Of Plants* (Spencer 6, 7).

²⁴ For a discussion of the possible romantic involvement between Behn (or her narrator) and Oroonoko, see Spencer; Margaret W. Ferguson.

²⁵ Othello recounts how he attracted Desdemona's attention: 'I spake of most disastrous chances, / Of moving accidents by flood and field; / Of hair-breadth scapes i' the imminent deadly breach; / Of being taken by the insolent foe, / And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence, / And portance in my travels' history' (1.3.150-55).

²⁶ Critics commenting on the narrator's seeming abandonment of the couple include Susan Andrade, Stephanie Athey and Daniel Cooper Alarcón, Martine Watson Brownley, Margaret W. Ferguson, and Jacqueline Pearson in 'Gender and Narrative.' Moira Ferguson argues that the narrator excuses her withdrawal from the scene by suggesting that Oroonoko is tainted by his treatment of Imoinda as a site of sexual and economic exploitation (10).

²⁷ The question of Imoinda's sexual desire is not completely straightforward. The narrator describes Imoinda as being 'ravished' (56) by Oroonoko, perhaps to protect the 'Black Venus' (44) from charges of lasciviousness. Imoinda throughout the narrative is described as 'modest' (45, 71).

²⁸ Here, too, we see parallels to Onahal's situation in the Otan. Before Imoinda's flagrant disregard for Otan law, Onahal enjoyed relative freedom from the king's watchful eye. Once Imoinda rebelled, however, Onahal's independence and power were stripped from her, much like the narrator's.

²⁹ When the planters whip and torture Oroonoko, for instance, they 'did not let [Imoinda] see this Barbarity committed towards her Lord . . . which was not a kindness to her, but for fears she shou'd Dye with the Sight, or Miscarry; and then they shou'd loose a young *Slave*, and perhaps the Mother' (91).

³⁰ The narrator tells us that she left Oroonoko's side because she was sickened by his smell, 'being my self but Sickly, and very apt to fall into Fits of dangerous Illness upon any extraordinary Melancholy' (98). Her mother and sister remain with Oroonoko and witness his death, 'but not suffer'd to save him; so rude and wild were the Rabble, and so inhumane were the Justices' (99). Vermillion points out the similarities between the narrator's 'melancholy' and Oroonoko's earlier 'Disease of Melancholy and Languishment' in order to illustrate her argument that the narrator and Oroonoko share a sense of both power and powerlessness (61). Drawing on John Mullan's assertion that sentimental novelists invested characters with melancholy as a way to indicate 'their position outside of a corrupt commercial world,' she argues that the 'melancholy' parallel here 'minimizes [the narrator's] earlier complicity with the slaveholders' (31).

³¹ Behn herself encourages this autobiographical reading most likely to promote the authenticity of the narrative. For instance, the narrator praises Colonel Martin, whom, she writes, 'I have celebrated in a Character of my New *Comedy*' (92), referring to George Marteen in Behn's 'The Younger Brother, or the Amorous Jilt.' For recent commentary on the connection between author and narrator, see Duffy, Goreau, Rogers, Spencer and Todd *Secret Life*.

³² Moira Ferguson provides a different, although parallel, interpretation of the narrator's disavowal of Oroonoko at key moments and of the concluding gesture toward Imoinda in relation to power: 'Women and power may seem to be mutually exclusive terms but in being enabled to contemplate their own disempowerment women partially resist its effect and refuse to internalize it' (11).

References:

- Aercke, Kristiaan P. 'Theatrical Background in English Novels of the Seventeenth Century.' *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 18.2 (1988): 120-136.
- Andrade, Susan. 'White Skin, Black Masks: Colonialism and the Sexual Politics of *Oroonoko*.' *Cultural Critique* 27 (1994): 189-214.
- Athey, Stephanie and Daniel Cooper Alarcón. '*Oroonoko*'s Gendered Economies of Honor/Horror: Reframing Colonial Discourse Studies in the Americas.' *American Literature* 65.3 (1993): 415-443.
- Backscheider, Paula. *Spectacular Politics: Theatrical Power and Mass Culture in Early Modern Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Bacon, Jon Lance. 'Wives, Widows and Writings in Restoration Comedy.' *Studies in English Literature* 31 (1991): 427-443.
- Behn, Aphra. *Oroonoko*. Ed. Catherine Gallagher. Bedford Cultural Edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000.
- . *The Rover. Oroonoko, The Rover, and Other Works*. Ed. Janet Todd. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Brown, Kathleen M. *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.
- Brownley, Martine Watson. 'The Narrator in *Oroonoko*.' *Essays in Literature* 4 (1977): 174-81.
- Carnell, Rachel K. 'Subverting Tragic Conventions: Aphra Behn's Turn to the Novel.' *Studies in the Novel* 31.2 (1999): 133-51.
- Cohen, Michael. '"Mirth and Grief Together": Plot Unity in Southerne's *Oroonoko*.' *Xavier University Studies* 11.3 (1972): 13-17.
- Duffy, Maureen. *The Passionate Shepherdess*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1977.
- Erickson, Robert. 'Mrs. A. Behn and the Myth of *Oroonoko*-Imoinda.' *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 5.3 (1993): 201-16.
- Ferguson, Margaret W. 'Juggling the Categories of Race, Class and Gender: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*' in this volume, 16-34.
- Ferguson, Moira. '*Oroonoko*: Birth of a Paradigm' in this volume, 1-15.
- Gallagher, Catherine. *Nobody's Story*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Goreau, Angeline. *Reconstructing Aphra: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn*. NY: Dial Press, 1980.
- Guffey, George. 'Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*: Occasion and Accomplishment.' *Two English Novelists: Aphra Behn and Anthony Trollope. Papers Read at a Clark Library Seminar, May 11, 1974*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975. 3-41.
- Hume, Robert D. *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.
- MacDonald, Joyce Green. 'The Disappearing African Woman: Imoinda in *Oroonoko* after Behn.' *ELH* 66 (1999): 71-86.
- Messenger, Ann. 'Novel into Play: Aphra Behn and Thomas Southerne.' *His and Hers: Essays in Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986. 41-70.
- Novak, Maximillian E. and David Stuart Rodes, ed. 'Introduction.' Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976. xiii-xlii.
- Pearson, Jacqueline. 'Gender and Narrative in the Fiction of Aphra Behn.' *Review of English Studies* 42.165; 42.166 (1991): 40-56; 179-90.

-
- . *The Prostituted Muse*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.
- Pope, Alexander. 'Imitations of Horace Epistle II.i.' *The Poems of Alexander Pope*. Ed. John Butt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963. 634-649.
- Rich, Julia. 'Heroic Tragedy in Southerne's *Oroonoko* (1695): An Approach to a Split-plot Tragicomedy.' *Philological Quarterly* 62.2 (1983): 187-200.
- Rogers, Katharine. 'Fact and Fiction in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*.' *Studies in the Novel* 20.1 (1988): 1-15.
- Rosenthal, Laura J. 'Owning *Oroonoko*: Behn, Southerne, and the Contingencies of Property' in this volume, 83-107.
- Southerne, Thomas. *Oroonoko*. Ed. Maximillian E. Novak and David Stuart Rodes. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976.
- Spencer, Jane. *Aphra Behn's Afterlife*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Spengemann, William C. 'The Earliest American Novel: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*.' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 38 (1984): 384-414.
- Todd, Barbara J. 'The Remarrying Widow: A Stereotype Reconsidered.' *Women in English Society 1500-1800*. Ed. Mary Prior. London and New York: Methuen, 1985. 54-92.
- Todd, Janet, ed. 'Introduction.' Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko, The Rover, and Other Works*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992. 1-22.
- . *The Secret Life of Aphra Behn*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997.
- Vermillion, Mary. 'Buried Heroism: Critiques of Female Authorship in Southerne's Adaptation of Behn's *Oroonoko*.' *Restoration* 16.1 (1992): 28-37.
- Zimbardo, Rose. 'Aphra Behn: A Dramatist in Search of the Novel.' *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 19 (1989): 277-87.