

After that, with an ill-favored knife, they cut his ears and his nose, and burned them; he still smoked on, as if nothing had touched him. Then they hacked off one of his arms, and still he bore up, and held his pipe. But at the cutting off the other arm, his head sunk, and his pipe dropped, and he gave up the ghost, without a groan, or a reproach. My mother and sister were by him all the while, but not suffered to save him, so rude and wild were the rabble, and so inhuman were the justices, who stood by to see the execution, who after paid dearly enough for their insolence. They cut Caesar in quarters, and sent them to several of the chief plantations. One quarter was sent to Colonel Martin, who refused it, and swore he had rather see the quarters of Banister and the governor himself than those of Caesar on his plantations, and that he could govern his Negroes without terrifying and grieving them with frightful spectacles of a mangled king.

Thus died this great man, worthy of a better fate, and a more sublime wit than mine to write his praise. Yet, I hope, the reputation of my pen is considerable enough to make his glorious name to survive to all ages, with that of the brave, the beautiful, and the constant Imoinda.

1688



RESPONSE

*Thomas Southerne: from Oroonoko: A Tragedy*¹

[DEBATING REBELLION]²

OROONOKO: What would you do?

ABOAN: Cut our oppressors' throats.

OROONOKO: And you would have me join in your design
Of murder?

ABOAN: It deserves a better name.

But be it what it will, 'tis justified

5 By self-defense, and natural liberty.

OROONOKO: I'll hear no more on't.

ABOAN: I am sorry for't.

1. After Behn's death, *Oroonoko* did more than any of her other works to sustain her fame, partly in print and partly in the theater. In 1696, the Irish-born, intermittently successful playwright Thomas Southerne (1660–1746) found cause to praise Behn's story but to puzzle over her choice of genre. "She had great command of the stage," he remarked in the dedication to the play he based on her book, "and I have often wondered that she would bury her favorite hero in a novel, when she might have revived him in the scene."

In *Oroonoko: A Tragedy*, Southerne undertook just such a revival, relocating *Oroonoko* from the printed page to the playhouse. The playwright added an erotic subplot about a pair of English sisters who have traveled to Surinam to seek rich husbands. More strikingly, he changed the race of the play's heroine. Imoinda is here not African but European, the daughter of a white "stranger in my father's court" who died protecting *Oroonoko* in battle. The play shifts timings, too: this Imoinda marries *Oroonoko* and becomes pregnant by him in Africa, shortly before the two are separately sold

into slavery. Their mixed-race marriage becomes one of several motifs by which Southerne echoes yet another 17th-century source: Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Audience response confirmed Southerne's faith in the theatrical power of Behn's protagonists. His play, restaged and re-adapted many times, became a touchstone text for the antislavery movement that grew in England and America over the next century and a half. Only with the appearance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the 1850s did the advocates of abolition find a more contemporary narrative to take *Oroonoko's* place. Southerne's tragedy abetted the alchemy by which Behn's intricately fictionalized "true history" survived its initial moment, and helped shape history thereafter.

2. From Act 3, Scene 2. *Oroonoko* and Imoinda, freshly reunited, hear Aboan make his case for insurrection. Southerne retains Behn's complex view of slavery: *Oroonoko* briefly defends the slaveholders as "innocent"; Aboan's arguments, in their tone and phrasing, sometimes echo those of *Othello's* arch-villain Iago.

OROONOKO: Nor shall you
ABOAN:

OROONOKO: No, I comm
ABOAN:

You are a slave your
10 Is now another's rig
Since the first mom
I've thought of not
And how to throw

OROONOKO: I have a sen
15 As painful, and as c
I feel for my Imoinc
Imoinda much the

But though I langu
I would not buy it a
20 Of black ingritud
That we deserved c
Murder the innocen

ABOAN:

OROONOKO: These men
If we are slaves, the

25 But bought us in ar
As we have done b
Many a wretch, an
They paid our price
Their property, a p
30 To manage as they
I do not tamely say

All they could lay
The load so light, s
(Considering they
35 And may inflict w
We ought not to c

ABOAN:

You do not know t
The toil, the labor
Which they impos

40 For senseless beas
Then if you saw th
They execute on e
Nay sometimes in
How worse than d
45 Your heart would l
How many wretch
To you, for their r

OROONOKO:
And wish I could

3. "We" here are Africans, who (as Behn

OROONOKO: Nor shall you think of it.

ABOAN: Not think of it!

OROONOKO: No, I command you not.

ABOAN: Remember, Sir,

You are a slave yourself, and to command
 10 Is now another's right. Not think of it!
 Since the first moment they put on my chains,
 I've thought of nothing but the weight of 'em,
 And how to throw 'em off. Can yours sit easy?

OROONOKO: I have a sense of my condition,
 15 As painful, and as quick, as yours can be.
 I feel for my Imoinda and myself;
 Imoinda much the tenderest part of me.
 But though I languish for my liberty,
 I would not buy it at the Christian price
 20 Of black ingratitude. They shannot say
 That we deserved our fortune by our crimes.
 Murder the innocent!

ABOAN: The innocent!

OROONOKO: These men are so, whom you would rise against.

If we are slaves, they did not make us slaves,
 25 But bought us in an honest way of trade:
 As we have done before 'em, bought and sold
 Many a wretch, and never thought it wrong.³
 They paid our price for us, and we are now
 Their property, a part of their estate,
 30 To manage as they please, Mistake me not,
 I do not tamely say, that we should bear
 All they could lay upon us. But we find
 The load so light, so little to be felt
 (Considering they have us in their power,
 35 And may inflict what grievances they please)
 We ought not to complain.

ABOAN: My Royal Lord!

You do not know the heavy grievances,
 The toil, the labors, weary drudgeries,
 Which they impose; burdens more fit for beasts,
 40 For senseless beasts to bear, than thinking men.
 Then if you saw the bloody cruelties
 They execute on every slight offense—
 Nay sometimes in their proud, insulting sport—
 How worse than dogs they lash their fellow-creatures:
 45 Your heart would bleed for 'em. O could you know
 How many wretches lift their hands and eyes
 To you, for their relief.

OROONOKO: I pity 'em.
 And wish I could with honesty do more.

3. "We" here are Africans, who (as Behn's story also emphasizes) sold slaves to each other, and to Europeans.

ABOAN: You must do more, and may, with honesty.
 50 O Royal Sir, remember who you are,
 A prince, born for the good of other men,
 Whose god-like office is to draw the sword
 Against oppression, and set free mankind;
 And this, I'm sure, you think oppression now.
 55 What though you have not felt these miseries,
 Never believe you are obliged to them.
 They have their selfish reasons, maybe, now,
 For using of you well. But there will come
 A time, when you must have your share of 'em.
 OROONOKO: You see how little cause I have to think so:
 Favored in my own person, in my friends;
 Indulged in all that can concern my care,
 In my Imoinda's soft society. [*Embracing her*]
 ABOAN: And therefore would you lie contented down,
 65 In the forgetfulness, and arms of love,
 To get young princes for 'em?
 OROONOKO: Say'st thou! ha!
 ABOAN: Princes, the heirs of empire, and the last
 Of your illustrious lineage, to be born
 To pamper up their pride, and be their slaves?
 OROONOKO: Imoinda! Save me, save me from that thought.
 IMOINDA: There is no safety from it. I have long
 Suffered with a mother's laboring pains,
 And can no longer. Kill me, kill me now,
 While I am blessed, and happy in your love,
 75 Rather than let me live to see you hate me
 As you must hate me: me, the only cause,
 The fountain of these flowing miseries.
 Dry up this spring of life, this poisonous spring,
 That swells so fast, to overwhelm us all.
 OROONOKO: Shall the dear babe, the eldest of my hopes,
 Whom I begot a prince, be born a slave?
 The treasure of this temple was designed
 T' enrich a kingdom's fortune; shall it here
 Be seized upon by vile unhallowed hands,
 85 To be employed in uses most profane?
 ABOAN: Nay, grant this man, you think so much your friend,
 Be honest, and intends all that he says.⁴
 He is but one, and in a government
 Where, he confesses, you have enemies
 90 That watch your looks. What looks can you put on
 To please these men, who are before resolved
 To read 'em their own way? alas! my Lord!
 If they incline to think you dangerous,

4. Aboan refers to Blanford, the play's counterpart to Behn's character Trefry: a young Englishman who has professed friendship for Oroonoko and promised that the governor, due soon in Surinam, will grant his freedom.

They have their
 95 And then who k
 May carry their
 IMOINDA:
 That does belong
 I shall be torn fr
 Helpless and mis
 100 To see that day
 OROONOKO:
 ABOAN: I know you are
 The governor's
 These mischiefs,
 But who is sure
 105 More mischiefs f
 Luxurious, passio
 Such a complex
 To countenance
 Will know no b
 110 If, in a fit of his
 With a strong h
 And force my r
 How can you he
 OROONOKO:
 The lion in his
 115 And the wide fo
 I feel the danger
 At the alarm an
 To man my hear
 Is there a power
 120 And shall I not
 To keep, to save
 This is your cau
 O! your were bc
 [to ABOAN] Ne
 125 What combinat
 Would'st thou e
 All thou would'
 For the great ca
 ABOAN: Now, my grea
 130 And since we h
 It cannot fail us
 The choicest sla
 Of their conditi
 They have their
 OROONOKO:

5. The lovers have been sundered (than grandfather) who wanted Imc

95 They have their knavish arts to make you so.
 And then who knows how far their cruelty
 May carry their revenge?

IMOINDA: To everything
 That does belong to you, your friends, and me;
 I shall be torn from you, forced away,
 Helpless and miserable. Shall I live
 100 To see that day again?⁵

OROONOKO: That day shall never come.

ABOAN: I know you are persuaded to believe
 The governor's arrival will prevent
 These mischiefs, and bestow your liberty.
 But who is sure of that? I rather fear
 105 More mischiefs from his coming. He is young,
 Luxurious, passionate, and amorous.
 Such a complexion, and made bold by power
 To countenance all he is prone to do,
 Will know no bounds, no law against his lusts.
 110 If, in a fit of his intemperance,
 With a strong hand he should resolve to seize
 And force my royal mistress from your arms,
 How can you help yourself?

OROONOKO: Ha! thou hast roused
 The lion in his den; he stalks abroad,
 115 And the wide forest trembles at his roar.
 I feel the danger now: my spirits start
 At the alarm and from all quarters come
 To man my heart, the citadel of love.
 Is there a power on earth to force you from me?
 And shall I not resist it? Not strike first
 120 To keep, to save you—to prevent that curse?
 This is your cause, and shall it not prevail?
 O! your were born all ways to conquer me.
 [to ABOAN] Now I am fashioned to thy purpose. Speak:
 125 What combination, what conspiracy,
 Would'st thou engage me in? I'll undertake
 All thou would'st have me now for liberty,
 For the great cause of love and liberty.

ABOAN: Now, my great master, you appear yourself.
 130 And since we have you joined in our design,
 It cannot fail us. I have mustered up
 The choicest slaves, men who are sensible
 Of their condition, and seem most resolved.
 They have their several parties.

OROONOKO: Summon 'em,

5. The lovers have been sundered once before, by the African king (in Southerne's play he is Oroonoko's father rather than grandfather) who wanted Imoinda for himself.

135 Assemble 'em. I will come forth and show
 Myself amongst 'em. If they are resolved,
 I'll lead their foremost resolutions.

ABOAN: I have provided those will follow you.

OROONOKO: With this reserve in our proceeding still:

140 The means that lead us to our liberty
 Must not be bloody.

ABOAN: You command in all.
 We shall expect you, Sir.

OROONOKO: You shannot long.

[*Exeunt OROONOKO and IMOINDA at one door, ABOAN at another.*]

["THUS 'TIS FINISHED"]⁶

OROONOKO: I see 'em coming.

They shannot overtake us. This last kiss.

145 And now farewell.

IMOINDA: Farewell, farewell forever.

OROONOKO: I'll turn my face away, and do it so.

Now, are you ready?

IMOINDA: Now. But do not grudge me

The pleasure in my death of a last look.

Pray look upon me—now I'm satisfied.

OROONOKO: So fate must be by this—

[*Going to stab her, he stops short; she lays her hands on his, in order to give the blow.*]

IMOINDA: Nay then I must assist you.

And since it is the common cause of both,

'Tis just that both should be employed in it,

Thus, thus 'tis finished, and I bless my fate, [*Stabs herself.*]

155 That where I lived, I die, in these loved arms. [*Dies.*]

OROONOKO: She's gone. And now all's at an end with me..

[*Throws himself by her.*]

But let me pay the tribute of my grief,

A few sad tears to thy loved memory,

And then I follow—

[*Weeps over her. A noise again.*]

But I stay too long.

160 The noise comes nearer. Hold, before I go,

There's something would be done. It shall be so.

And then, Imoinda, I'll come all to thee. [*Rises.*]

[*BLANFORD, and his party, enter before the GOVERNOR and his party, swords drawn on both sides.*]⁷

GOVERNOR: You strive in vain to save him. He shall die.

BLANFORD: Not while we can defend him with our lives.

GOVERNOR: Where is he?

OROONOKO: Here's the wretch whom you would have.

6. From Act 5, Scene 5. In Southerne's play as in Behn's story the rebellion fails. Anticipating capture, Oroonoko and Imoinda opt instead for death.

7. Blanford, having tried earlier to mediate between the governor and the rebel slaves, has witnessed the colonist's cruelty and now seeks to rescue Oroonoko.

Put up your swords
 Engage you in the fight
 Who cannot live
 This object will

[*They gather about the*

BLANFORD:

170 Alas! there was

GOVERNOR: Who did

OROONOKO:

Bloody I know it

Your laws should

I do resign myself

175 The hands of justice

For you—and for

[*Stabs the GOVERNOR*

STANMORE: He has killed

OROONOKO: 'Tis as it

To be a witness

180 In the next world

BLANFORD: I hope the

In the next world

Pagan, or unbeliever

To all he knew.

185 There's mercy shown

But Christians, give

Have no excuse

[*Exeunt omnes.*]

1695

Put up your swords, and let not civil broils
Engage you in the cursed cause of one
Who cannot live, and now entreats to die.
This object will convince you.

[*They gather about the body.*]

BLANFORD: 'Tis his wife!

170 Alas! there was no other remedy.

GOVERNOR: Who did the bloody deed?

ORONOKO: The deed was mine:

Bloody I know it is, and I expect

Your laws should tell me so. Thus self-condemned

I do resign myself into your hands,

175 The hands of justice—but I hold the sword

For you—and for myself.

[*Stabs the GOVERNOR, and himself, then throws himself by IMOINDA's body.*]

STANMORE: He has killed the governor, and stabbed himself.

ORONOKO: 'Tis as it should be now. I have sent his ghost

To be a witness of that happiness

180 In the next world, which he has denied us here. [*Dies.*]

BLANFORD: I hope there is a place of happiness

In the next world for such exalted virtue.

Pagan, or unbeliever, yet he lived

To all he knew. And if he went astray,

185 There's mercy still above to set him right.

But Christians, guided by the heavenly ray,

Have no excuse if we mistake our way.

[*Exeunt omnes.*]

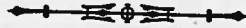
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1695



1696

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