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On Aphra Behn's Progressiveness

“most of these young slaves were undone in love with a fine she-slave” (Behn 2206)

Aphra Behn is lauded as one of the first feminists, who helped remove stigma for vocal and opinionated women. While her novel, *Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave*, is progressive for its time period, there are still many problems with the way gender and race are portrayed.

The men only fall “in love” with Imoinda for her beauty. While she does have a great love and have loyalty to Oroonoko, there is nothing to suggest the men like her for anything other than her looks. The author writes “love,” however that is strange, because it seems more like lust or infatuation. It is interesting that Behn, who was known for writings that were considered lewd or vulgar, would cloak sexual desire in the form of “love.” Perhaps this is to make Imoinda seem more pure and wholesome, like a good match for Oroonoko, who Behn consistently describes as noble. However, that would call Behn's own feminist views into question, as the reader only sees Imoinda through Oroonoko's, and then the narrator's, point of view. In fact, the reader is first introduced to Imoinda through Oroonoko's eyes, which is different from actually seeing the woman herself. Imoinda is only described in the novel in relation to the men: as a beautiful woman, a concubine, a wife. Behn's descriptions of Imoinda, and how they are filtered through the male gaze, show how the values of her time period limit her perspective and her writings.

It is interesting to note the way Aphra Behn uses the word “slave” to describe the enslaved people. By using that word, and the way she modifies it as “she-slave,” Behn is not allowing these people to have an identity beyond their enslavement. The word “slave” has nothing to do with race, gender, personality, or actions, it is merely a status marker. By calling the men, and Imoinda, “slave,” Aphra Behn is not looking beyond their conditions. Admittedly, for her time, she is progressive, as she looks at Oroonoko as a human being. The author actually gives Oroonoko favourable traits of honour and nobility that any reader can admire. However, by referring to the men as “slaves,” Behn strips away the personal, and normalizes their condition. This is a major concern when looking at the novel. There is no real indictment of the institution of slavery. Although the people do not like their condition, Oroonoko himself lives a comfortable life in Suriname. Oroonoko is depicted as this noble man, and yet, he sold people into slavery, which is a deplorable act. In this sense, Behn is not progressive at all because she normalizes slavery and the rampant racism of the time.

Throughout Western literature, there has been the idea of the deceitful woman. The Bible, which is arguably one of the most influential texts in English literature, features the story of Adam and Eve, where Eve brings man’s downfall. This tale has been passed down and told throughout history, and it is interesting that Aphra Behn uses similar language in her story. She writes that the enslaved males “were undone in love” with Imoinda. Her use of the word “undone” is particularly interesting as it paints the men’s affections for her in a bad light. “Undone” has a very negative connotation, and it seems to refer back to the old ideas that women would bring about the destruction of man. That Behn, who is well-regarded as a feminist, would

use language that portrays a woman in the traditional, gendered role of the deceitful woman marks her as not very progressive at all.

While Behn is an admirable woman, who paved the way for women to express themselves through their words, she is very much a product of her time. While she does show women in a different light, Imoinda is still tied to a man for her identity and is portrayed in a negative way, in regards to men. Additionally, Behn does not seem to be commenting on the evils of slavery, therefore, she cannot be called a truly progressive writer today.