

Visible Passion and an Invisible Woman: Theatrical *Oroonoko*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explain the dynamics behind the whitening of Imoinda in Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko*. We could argue that a particular mindset which involved the whitening of Imoinda can be detected by observing the theatricality of the play. The text of *Oroonoko* aims to visualize the inner passions of players through their motions, based on the acting theory of that time. Those passions were the key factor in bringing the audience and the players together. Through the interaction among the theatre company and the theatregoers, a white female body was required to share a "universal" passion.

When the dramatic adaptation of *Oroonoko* by Thomas Southerne was premiered at the Drury Lane Theatre in November 1695, one significant change was carried out: the heroine, Imoinda, was no longer a black African woman, but a white woman. Southerne's *Oroonoko* achieved great popularity among contemporary audiences and it survived as a repertoire for almost the entire eighteenth century. As we will see later, critics have tried to answer a simple but difficult question, "why was Imoinda made into a white?" This question also lies at the center of this paper.

We can see a passing reference to Southerne's *Oroonoko* in a short satire called "The Tryal of Skill: or, A New Session of the Poets. Calculated for the Meridian of Parnassus" published anonymously in August 1704. "The Tryal of Skill" is sometimes regarded as evidence that "He [Southerne] was attacked for failing to give Imoinda, born in 'an *Indian Air*, / 'an *Indian Hue*'" (Novak and Rodes xxxvii, n. 73). Although Novak and Rodes cite only a small part of the satire and concludes that it accuses Southerne for the whitened Imoinda, I would say this is somewhat misleading. The whole part of "The Tryal of Skill" concerning Southerne reads as follows:

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Tom Southerne Petition'd the next, and besought
 The Court, that the must be preferr'd,
 For he two Fat Places already had got,
 And most grievously wanted a Third.

When the Judges amaz'd at his Temper and Suit,
 Remanded him back to *White-hall*,
 And declar'd, who had lost his Esteem and Repute,
 Was not fit for their Business at all.

Not but *Oroonoko* some Merit might plead,
 And take off from the weight of Offence,
 Were but every Character Just which we read,
 And Consistent with Reason and Sence.

Were his Heroine but like his Heroe, not Fair,
 Since their Breath in one Country they drew,
 And She that was Born in an *Indian* Air,
 Set forth in an *Indian* Hue.

Yet for all that Mistake, it would be worth his while,
 And his Interest might not be lost,
 For if this Contradiction he could reconcile,
 He might stand assue'd of the Post. (525-44)¹

The poet begins with teasing Southerne with the 'two Fat Places' he possessed in both Tory and Whig sides; Southerne deserted Toryism to have a profitable post at the Whig side. Southerne, 'who had lost his Esteem and Repute' because of his turnabout, does not fit for the 'Third' post at the court of Apollo, the god of poetry, the satirist says. Then the poet advances to *Oroonoko* and acknowledges that the play may have 'some Merit' though with a proviso. If, the poet teases, 'his Heroine' were 'but like his Heroe'

¹ 'Tryal of Skill' *Poems on Affairs of State: Augustan Satirical Verse 1660-1714*, ed. Frank H. Ellis Vol. 6 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1970) pp. 679-711. All references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by line numbers.

i.e. if both of them were black as Behn's original, Southerne's interest might not be lost. It is true that the satirist expresses some uneasiness at the whitened Imoinda, but I would argue that this satire is not a type of a bitter indignation against Southerne as Novak and Rodes maintain. Rather, it is a joke caviling at a point slightly outlying from Southerne's own merit as a dramatist.² The contemporaries all knew that there was a theatrical convention that an actress did not black up her face. Southerne might have had a chance to break that rule, as the satirist implies, but he simply didn't. The poet makes fun of it, not seriously, but just in order to amuse the readers. The importance of this satire lies in two points. One is that it shows the whitened Imoinda was no small news for the contemporary literary world: the other is that a theatregoer of that time, just like the satirist, might feel some uneasiness at the whitened Imoinda.

We can say that the critics of our time often feel uneasiness at Southerne's Imoinda because "why was Imoinda made into a white?" is one of the most frequently asked questions concerning Southerne's *Oroonoko*. Unfortunately, we still do not have direct evidence to answer this question, as Jenifer B. Elmore somewhat resignedly states "No one knows for sure why Southerne decided to make Imoinda white" (37). However, when mentioning the whitened Imoinda, critics tend to put it in two contexts. Firstly, the miscegenetic couple of Oroonoko and Imoinda are put in the context of drama history, as Suvir Kaul reads "The Othello-paradigm also allows for the whitening of Imoinda" (89).³ Secondly, other critics read the text along with the discourse of the sentimental reaction of the eighteenth century against slavery, as Joyce Green MacDonald argues "the whiteness of Imoinda in *Oroonoko* after Behn is the product of a cult of sensibility as it confronted that most ungentle of human institutions, slavery." (75-76)⁴

² This is the poet's strategy throughout this satire. For example, Peter Motteux is teased for his commercial "dealing" in *China* (11), and Thomas D'Urfey is ridiculed for imitating the nobleman by hiring "Footman" (66).

³ J. R. Oldfield also reads that the whitened Imoinda's "obvious model here was Shakespeare's *Othello*." (13, n.7)

⁴ Jenifer B. Elmore gives a similar explanation that "Southerne's apparently racist decision to erase Imoinda's blackness may have actually contributed to his play's eventual use as anti-slavery propaganda." (36)

When we have a look at the history of theatre, one simple answer to the question above is that there was a theatrical convention that did not allow actresses to black up.⁵ As the author of *Tryal of Skill* presupposes the existence of the convention, we could argue that Southerne simply followed the rule of the theatre of that time. Then the question needs to be asked is *why* was the gender asymmetry of the theatrical convention of blacking up so persistent as to make Southerne change Imoinda into a white? That the concept of femininity was colored is the answer, Felicity A. Nussbaum argues:

Since the color of complexion was an index to virtue by the eighteenth century, I am arguing, a black Imoinda could not easily represent a decorous and heroic femininity on stage. Another very important reason for Imoinda's color transformation is the material fact that no black woman had yet appeared on the eighteenth-century stage. A blackface white woman in a central serious dramatic role would have violated femininity in a way that another more familiar stage convention of disguise, crossdressing, did not. (158)

Nussbaum's argument, that the color of white had a close association with femininity, has a point. One example would be enough: the adjective *fair* which can be used to describe women has meant both *beautiful* and *light* as opposed to *dark* since the sixteenth century. To sum up, the tradition of representing miscegenation in drama, the herald of sentimentalism in the last decade of the seventeenth century, the existence of theatrical convention, and the aesthetical spirit of the time that connects female virtue and the color white—these have been counted as the basic conditions that prevented an actress from painting her face black on the Restoration stage.

These previous researches are founded on the cause-and-effect model—something *outside* the theatre, such as some discourses and the existing conventions of theatre, caused Imoinda to become a white. However, I would argue that the dynamics behind the whitening of Imoinda is better understood when we observe the theatrical aspects of *Oroonoko* and grasp something *inside* the theatre: the collaborative moment between the theatre company and the audience. Along with other tragedies of that time, *Oroonoko* is based on the idea that it is necessary to express some

⁵ Margaret Ferguson regards the theatrical convention as the chief reason: the *change* may perhaps be explained as Southerne's bow to a strikingly gendered and also colored convention of the Restoration stage—namely that male English actors could appear in blackface but actresses evidently could not (219-20).

passions through the actors' motions on the stage. The project to make passions visible in the theatre is intertwined with the condition of theatre and, above all, theatrical convention that makes a black woman invisible. This paper aims to explore how a mindset which required the whitened Imoinda was generated. This will be done by focusing on the theatricality of Southerne's *Oroonoko*. The theatre was an arena where a particular ideology was generated and circulated through the mutual responses between the theatre company and the audience.

I

To start with, a brief look at Charles Gildon's *The Life of Mr. Thomas Betterton* would be a great help to see a version of acting theory of the Restoration theatre and to grasp the theatricality of *Oroonoko*. Although the title, *The Life of Mr. Thomas Betterton*, sounds like a book about the life story of the most important actor of the time, Gildon's book is not only a biography of Betterton but rather a set of instructions for acting for novice actors, in which Gildon shows his judgment about what a theatre performance – to be more precise, a performance of tragedy – should be.⁶ He repeatedly insists that the expression by body and facial movement should correspond with verbal expression in order to perform a passion that has arisen within the actor:

Every Passion or Emotion of the Mind has from Nature its proper and

⁶ Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume evaluate this book as follows: "Much of the specific commentary Gildon plagiarized wholesale from French rhetoric handbooks, so we cannot attribute this material directly to Betterton. We would argue, however, that if these sentiments and dicta had not seemed appropriate to Betterton, Gildon (not the most popular of men) would have been laying himself open to severe ridicule (66). So far, any "severe ridicule" of Gildon for the publication of this book has not been found, and we can regard the acting theory and practice revealed in this book as a rather correct portrait of the acting performance of the Restoration actors. For, though this book was published in 1710 after the death of Betterton, it includes Betterton's (Gildon repeatedly insists so) acting theory provided through commentary on his important roles such as Hamlet, which he played soon after the reopening of the theatres in 1661 till some years before his death. Sometimes "the advice we find "Betterton" giving seems astonishingly naturalistic" indeed, at times downright Stanislavskian, but we should not judge it from the standpoint of modern theatre production because "the point is how they [the performances] looked to an audience familiar with their conventions" (66). Paul Goring points out that "Gildon grabbed at the most fitting existing work on the subject he had to hand, for the section is largely plagiarized from the English translation of Le Faucheur's *Traitté*." (124)

peculiar Countenance, Sound and Gesture; and the whole Body of Man, all his Looks, and every Sound of his Voice, like Strings on an Instrument, receive their Sounds from the various Impulse of the Passions. (43)

What controls an actor is, according to Gildon, “the various Impulse of the Passions”⁷ An actor is required to express the passions through their histrionics. This idea is based on the theory as follows:

The Stage ought to be the Seat of Passion in its various kinds, and therefore the Actor ought to be thoroughly acquainted with the whole Nature of the Affections, and Habits of the Mind, or else he will never be able to express them justly in his Looks and Gestures, as well as in the Tone of his Voice, and manner of Utterance. (40)

To present several passions to the audience, actors need to learn quite a lot of types of feelings and the “Looks and Gestures” as well as “the Tone of his Voice, and manner of Utterance” that properly represent them. The business of a theatre is to set a stage as “the Seat of Passion” the actors should express several passions through their performances so that the audience can share the same feeling as well.⁸ This is the belief underlying Gildon’s book.⁹

When focusing on the aspect of the play as an acting script, we realize that Southerne’s *Oroonoko* is based on a similar idea. In several scenes, especially of the tragic main plot, the actors are expected to perform and convey some passions to the audience. We can see some cues for expressing such passions embedded in lines:

OROONOKO.

O! can you think of nothing dearer to me?
 Dearer than Liberty, my Country, Friends,
 Much dearer than my Life? that I have lost.

⁷ It does not seem that Gildon makes clear distinction among several concepts, for example between “passion” and “emotion” here. Gildon’s diction is usually rather opaque.

⁸ As Joseph R. Roach maintains, a classical idea that an actor “was able to act on the bodies of the spectators who shared that space with him”(27) was commonly shared in Betterton’s time. As for the relationship among oratory, acting, and Galenic medicine, see Roach chapter 1.

⁹ Brewster Rogerson argues that this belief was shared among the artists of the eighteenth century: “His [the artist’s] function í was to represent the universal actions and passions of men— not as variable quirks of temperament, but as permanent elements of human character.”(72)

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The tenderest, best beloved, and loving Wife.

BLANFORD. Alas! I pity you.

OROONOKO. Do, pity me:

Pity's a-kin to Love; and every thought
Of that soft kind is welcome to my Soul.
I would be pity'd here.

BLANFORD. I dare not ask
More than you please to tell me: but if you
Think it convenient to let me know
Your Story, I dare promise you to bear
A part in your Distress, if not assist you.

OROONOKO. Thou honest-hearted man! I wanted such,
Just such a Friend as thou art, that would sit
Still as the night, and let me talk whole days
Of my *Imoinda*. O! I'll tell thee all
From first to last; and pray observe me well. (2.2.53-69)¹⁰

Here Oroonoko tells his sadness of losing his wife—later he is going to be overjoyed at meeting his wife that he had thought dead, though—to his nominal master Blanford, who succeeds the role of compassionate fellow from Trefry in Behn's original. It is expected for Mr. Harland, an obscure actor who played Blanford at the premiere, to show pity for Oroonoko. Oroonoko's lines above such as "Do, pity me" and "I would be pity'd here" work as stage directions for the actor who plays Blanford. On the other hand, what Oroonoko is expected to perform is love and the sadness of losing it. As his line "Pity's a-kin to Love" shows, this scene is, in part, designed to express the proximity of and difference between pity and love. Southerne's *Oroonoko* has an aspect of making a catalogue of passions, and the performance of this play has an aspect of being an exhibition of how to perform them. The starting point for Oroonoko to deliver his inner feeling is the sound "O!" which is usually used as a theatrical sign to reveal that his or her heart is filled with a strong passion such as sadness or love. In this play Oroonoko repeats "O!" so many times to deliver his passion during his story, as in "O! I

¹⁰ Thomas Southerne, *Oroonoko*, eds. Robert Jordan and Harold Love, *The Works of Thomas Southerne* Vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) pp. 85-180. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by act, scene and line numbers.

was too happyø(2.2.95) and -O my *Imoinda!*ø(2.2.100). Oroonoko is a medium, as it were, to convey the feeling of loveø and the sadness of losing itø to the audience through his performance. What is designed through the production of Southerneø adaptation is to display on the stage such feelings as pity, love and other passions.

Oroonoko in this play is torn between love and honour as his lines delivered in the last scene accurately show: -To Honour bound! and yet a Slave to Love! / I am distracted by their rival Powers, / And both will be obeyødø(5.5.1-3). He is expected to show his love in his relationship between Imoinda, and to perform his honour in his bond with Aboan, his right-hand man. Aboan is the character who constantly reminds Oroonoko of the importance of honour. Interestingly enough, honour, which is a necessary requirement for a noble hero, is translated into a passion in Aboanø rhetoric:

ABOAN. Sir, another time,
 You wouød have found it sooner: but I see
 Love has your Heart, and takes up all your thoughts.
 OROONOKO. And canst thou blame me?
 ABOAN. Sir, I must not blame
 you.
 But as our fortune stands there is a Passion
 (Your pardon Royal Mistress, I must speak:)
 That wouød become you better than your Love:
 A brave resentment; which inspirød by you,
 Might kindle, and diffuse a generous rage
 Among the Slaves, to rouze and shake our Chains,
 And struggle to be free. (3.2.65-75)

After meeting his supposedly dead but instead very alive wife Imoinda, he indulges himself in his life with her. Though they are bought as slaves, they are actually exempted from servitude due to Blanfordø benevolence to them. But Aboan is such an honourable man that he cannot bear himself or Oroonoko being a slave. His aim is to make Oroonoko lead the fight to -struggle to be freeø Aboan has insight into Oroonokoø heart and points out that -Love has your Heart, and takes up all your thoughtsø In order to achieve his aim, what Aboan tries to do here is, above all, to indicate -a Passioní that wouød becomeøOroonoko better than his love that he is now indulging in. He articulates a passion, -brave resentmentø which Oroonoko should

perform so that he can head for an honourable deed.

Although Aboan regards it as the most disgraceful condition, the state of slavery in which Oroonoko does not hesitate to stay is, irrationally enough, rather a fair and just result than an intolerable abuse for Oroonoko. He regards his condition as a slave as follows:

If we are Slaves, they did not make us Slaves;
 But bought us in an honest way of trade:
 As we have done before æm, bought and sold
 Many a wretch, and never thought it wrong.
 They paid our Price for us, and we are now
 Their Property, a part of their Estate,
 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,^í
 We ought not to complain. (3.2.108-20)

As Laura Rosenthal argues, ‘Behn’s *Oroonoko* problematizes human commodification; Southerne’s seeks complex ways to justify it’ (26), this speech of Oroonoko seems to brace the colonialist version of commercialism by justifying his state as a commodity.¹¹ Also we can read some marks of discourse concerning the contemporary argument of property right, as Aspasia Velissariou points out.¹² What I would like to underline instead is the irrationality of Oroonoko who thinks of himself as ‘Their Property’ and respects their ‘honest way of trade’ though he had actually been betrayed by an English captain and sold as a slave. Considering that Oroonoko blamed the captain ‘for Breach of Faith’ (1.2.197) at his first appearance on the stage,

¹¹ There has been a controversy whether Behn and Southerne problematized human commodification or commodified royalty. For example, Wylie Sypher regards Behn’s *Oroonoko* as a project that foregrounds abused royalty. He argues Behn ‘is repelled not by slavery, but by the enslaving of a prince’ (110), which I would rather agree with. Some critics draw a different conclusion concerning Southerne’s *Oroonoko*, as Bridget Orr argues that ‘Southerne was consistently hostile to the commodification of persons and relations’ (275).

¹² Velissariou argues that ‘Property was ascribed a theoretical status central to the Whig polemics against patriarchalist theories that assumed the King’s original holding of all property.’ (151)

Oroonoko's speech here is rather just an indiscreet excuse for preferring to live in peace, if temporally, with Imoinda than a logical consequence of his mature reflection on slavery. In fact, Oroonoko regarded slavery as the worst of conditions of human life: 'Whatever World we next are thrown upon, / Cannot be worse than this.' (1.2.187-88) Irrationality is the key here, for we can see Oroonoko moved not by Aboan's reasonable persuasion to stand up for their 'natural liberty' (3.2.89) but by his sensational rhetoric that causes fear in Oroonoko over losing Imoinda. Oroonoko decides to rise for fear that the governor who is 'young, / Luxurious, passionate, and amorous' (3.2.198-9) and knows there is 'no law against his Lust' (3.2.202) may ravish Imoinda instead of freeing them. Slavery in this play is at first depicted as an inhuman condition, but later it becomes rather a theatrical framework in which Oroonoko, caught in a dilemma, shows not his logical thought but his passions.¹³

When Oroonoko decides to rise up, what he does first is to perform his 'brave resentment' through his acting. It is not until this scene that Oroonoko shows his heroic fierceness:

Ha! thou hast rous'd
 The Lion in his den, he stalks abroad,
 And the wide Forrest trembles at his roar.
 I find 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
 To keep, to save you? to prevent that curse?
 This is your Cause, and shall it not prevail?
 O! you were born all ways to conquer me.
 Now I am fashion'd to thy purpose: speak,
 What Combination, what Conspiracy,
 Wouldst thou engage me in? I'de undertake

¹³ Diana Jaher points out that the play expresses 'antislavery rhetoric' (51) through Aboan's voice. It is true, as Jaher argues, that Aboan 'proves himself Oroonoko's equal' (51) and looks like an abolitionist hero, but I would rather stress Aboan's conventional function in a heroic tragedy who embodies the concept of honour and leads the hero, Oroonoko, toward the honourable deed.

All thou woudst have me now for liberty,
For the great Cause of Love and Liberty. (3.2.206-221)

It is notable that the words that are accented on the syllable with the *r*-sound *r*ouzd, *r*abroad, *r*trembles and *r*oar are repeated in the first three lines of the citation. Oroonoko here theatrically imitates the roaring *Lion* the king of the beasts, showing his heroic character. Since it was usual to create roles for individual actors (Hume, 20), these lines must have been written based on the histrionic merit of the actor John Verbruggen who plays Oroonoko. He is said, though satirically, to have *a cracked Voice* like a *broken Drum* (*A Comparison between the Two Stages* 106). This can be read as Verbruggen's characteristic of being good at presenting strong passions with a wild voice. His talent was praised by Tony Aston as follows: *Jack Verbruggen, that rough diamond, shone more bright than all the artful polished brilliants that ever sparkled on our stage* (265). Aston refers to this *Lion* speech as the one that *best conceive[s] his manly, wild starts* (265).¹⁴ Oroonoko, played by Verbruggen at the premiere, was supposed to express his wild passions when he pursues honour. Once he is *fashioned to* Aboan's purpose, he begins to rant just like heroes of the heroic tragedies and follow the banner of *the great Cause of Love and Liberty* Oroonoko's self-fashioning to be a heroic warrior is made through performing his heroic passion of brave resentment.

The final scene, act five scene five, in which Oroonoko and Imoinda choose death to prevent disgrace, is the most theatrical and appealing of all the scenes. A notable feature of the last scene is, first of all, that it is the longest of all the scenes of this play and mainly consists of dialogue between the hero and the heroine.¹⁵ Oroonoko, who decided to kill Imoinda and their baby in her belly in order to avoid dishonour, postpones the fatal deed as many as four times, and then his agony is also prolonged and kept displayed on the stage. Even after the parting kiss and embrace, Oroonoko cannot stab Imoinda: he exclaims *O! where shall I strike?* (5.5.232) and the first pause comes. A few lines later, she is ready to accept her death *with open Arms* (5.5.249),

¹⁴ This scene's theatricality is so notable that it seems to have continued to be an attraction for the audience. Wylie Sypher refers to William Hazlitt's comment on Oroonoko played by Edmund Kean that this speech was *the high point of the role* (120).

¹⁵ Act five scene five occupies 312 lines (which is 45 lines longer than the second longest scene, act one scene two) of a total of 2,575 lines. 206 lines of the last scene are the dialogue between Oroonoko and Imoinda.

but he *drops his Dagger as he looks on her, and throws himself on the Ground* (5.5.250 s.d.). For Imoinda, it is *more than Death to see you thus [Oroonoko down to his knees]* (5.5.259) and she tries to kill herself by a dagger, which he takes up *in haste...from her* (5.5.260 s.d.). Finally, at the fourth postponement, Oroonoko's dilemma is shown almost like a series of pictures:

IMOINDA. Farewell, farewell for ever.

OROONOKO. I'de 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 meô Now I'âm satisfied.

OROONOKO. So Fate must be by thisô

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,

øTis just that both should be employed in it.

Thus, thus øtis finisht, and I bless my Fate, [*Stabs her self.*

That where I liv'æd, I die, in these lov'æd Arms. [*Dyes.*

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

Soft, lay her down. O we will part no more. [*Throws himself by her.*

But let me pay the tribute of my Grief,

A few sad Tears to thy loved Memory,

And then I followô *Weeps over her.* (5.5.269-84)

It is notable that this last moment for Imoinda is performed through a series of theatrical motions. First, Oroonoko turns his face away from Imoinda, just like the description for expressing *Aversion* in Gildon's book as we will see soon. She then asks him to give her a last look of him, so they talk face-to-face again. Next he tries to stab her, which he cannot achieve by himself. Imoinda assists Oroonoko's fatal deed and commits suicide as a result. Finally Oroonoko throws himself by the dead Imoinda, and then weeps over her. We could understand what has happened even without their lines. In other words, we can actually see what is going on and what kind of passion is displayed on the stage:

Imoinda's resolution and Oroonoko's dilemma both derived from their mutual love.

In this dialogue, Oroonoko is expected to perform his dilemma through his acting and in turn to become a medium for conveying his dilemma to the audience. One of the passions he displays is actually performed based on Gildon's acting theory:

To this I may add, that the Head ought always to be turn'd on the same side, to which the *Actions* of the rest of the Body are directed, except when they are employ'd to express our Aversion to Things, we refuse; or on Things we detest and abhor: For these Things we reject with the *Right Hand*, at the same time turning the Head away to the *Left*. (Gildon 59)

Though Gildon's instruction for expressing 'Aversion' may seem a little overdone for a modern reader, this kind of excessive acting style is recommended throughout the book. Oroonoko actually follows this pattern to show his dilemma in the last scene when he tries to but actually cannot kill his beloved Imoinda. *A Comparison between the Two Stages* describes *Oroonoko*, with a fair insight, as a play that 'has Merit, particularly the last Scene' (19). As we have seen, what the text tries to achieve throughout the play is to visualize the inner passion of the players through their theatrical acting, which is most successfully accomplished in the last scene.

II

Why does the text foreground the idea of visualizing several passions on the stage? In order to answer this question, we need to grasp the mutual responses between the theatre company and the audience. The theatre company's strategy for producing a stage performance is always, to some extent, influenced by the audience's demand for the stage. We have to observe how a collaborative project, as it were, between the theatre company and the audience was performed in the theatre. It will improve our understanding of the dynamics behind the bleaching of Imoinda.

We need to keep the condition of the theatre in our mind in order to understand why the text of *Oroonoko* adheres to the idea of expressing passions through the players' motions. First, as Lisa Freeman succinctly sums up, the theatre of the eighteenth century was 'not a theatre of the fourth wall' (4) but 'a theatre of interaction' (5). It was not unusual at all that the spectators hissed down the actors from the pit or talked aloud to each other, or to the actors on the stage, even during the show. Sometimes spectators seated even on the stage and enjoyed 'the process of being

watched (Freeman 17). This situation continued from the late seventeenth century theatre where *Oroonoko* was first staged.¹⁶ It was a theatre of interaction which had a different custom and purpose from modern theatre where we expect to become absorbed in characters. Second, in the Restoration period the theatre in England was an actors theatre, as distinct from a playwrights theatre, a directors theatre or a designers theatre (Loftis et al. 131). Actors were at the center of the business of the theatre: roles were usually created according to the lines of the players, and spectators expected to see their favorite actors, male and female, on stage. The audience's attention was primarily paid to the actors in the theatre where the task of the performer was to establish and maintain a social bond (Love 89) between the actors and the spectators. Finally, according to the acting theory of that time, it was passions expressed through players acting that were considered to be the catalyst to make the social bond among those attended the theatre. Charles Gildon explains the importance of moving the audience by the passions emanated from the actors:

But to make these Motions of the Face and Hands easily understood, that is, useful in the moving of the Passions of the Auditors, or rather Spectators, they must be properly adapted to the thing you speak of, your Thoughts and Design; and always resembling the *Passion* you would express or excite. (Gildon 53)

In order to make the audience see several passions performed through the actors' histrionics, the players had to make use of the 'Motions of the Face and Hands' which 'must be properly adapted to their inner 'Thoughts and Design'. If it is properly done, Gildon says, it is 'useful in moving the Passions' of the audience. Colley Cibber also gives a similar explanation for why actors should evoke a passion within themselves: 'He that feels not himself the Passion he would raise, will talk to a sleeping Audience' (62). Actors need to feel the passion they 'would raise' in themselves to make the audience evoke the same one. The presupposition of this idea is that passions are universal and every human being can share them.¹⁷ Passions were a kind of psychological cement to make a social bond between the actors and the audience. In

¹⁶ The situation was almost the same with the late seventeenth century theatre. See Leacroft 97.

¹⁷ For example, Descartes supposed six 'primitive' passions, 'Wonder, Love, Hatred, Desire, Joy, and Sadness' which could generate all other passions. (56) As for the theories of passions in the eighteenth century, see Roach, especially chapter 2.

such a theatre, a spectator expected to see ‘points’ the scenes appropriate to express passions in which actors were ‘to be held up, as it were, for the inspection and applause of the audience’ (Love 89). As we have already seen, Southerne’s *Oroonoko* is highly calculated to present regularly several ‘points’ such as Oroonoko’s ‘Lion speech’ and the pictorial final scene, throughout the play.¹⁸ We could argue that the condition of the theatre of that time required such a dramaturgy.

The genre of this drama, sometimes called ‘split-plot tragicomedy’ has also been an area of discussion concerning *Oroonoko* as a drama.¹⁹ Southerne’s *Oroonoko* consists of two almost separate plots: one is the tragic main plot of Oroonoko and Imoinda, and the other is the comic plot in which the Welldon sisters try to hunt for husbands. These two plots are not tightly connected at all but develop independently, and regularly alternate almost scene by scene. They merge in act five scene two where Blanford asks the characters of the subplot to act to save Oroonoko: ‘Will you join me: ‘Tis *Oroonoko’s* Cause, / A Lover’s cause, a wretched Woman’s Cause’ (5.2.12-13). Until this point, the play is almost divided into two separate plots and the audience is expected to receive them alternately. John Hawkesworth, who in 1759 adapted Southerne’s *Oroonoko* into a ‘pure’ tragedy by cutting out the comic subplot, observes that Southerne was a ‘Slave to Custom in a laughing Age, / With ribbald Mirth he stain’d the sacred Page’ (Prologue, A2). John Ferriar, who in 1788 adapted Hawkesworth’s *Oroonoko* into *The Prince of Angola*, remarks that Hawkesworth’s merit was ‘in rejecting the absurd, and insufferable under plot’ which Southerne catered to ‘delighting the gross and depraved audience of that time’ (Preface, ii). Encouraged by these adaptors’ comments, many discussed why Southerne made *Oroonoko* a split-plot tragicomedy.²⁰

One possible answer is that the audience liked it. More correctly, the theatre company, including Southerne the dramatist, expected that the audience would like it. The epilogue spoken by Mrs. Verbruggen, who played Charlot Welldon, reveals the

¹⁸ The final scene is one of the most famous ‘points’ and is depicted in several illustrations added at the publication of the texts. See, for example, Illustration 1 below.

¹⁹ See Rich.

²⁰ Novak and Rodes argue, for example, that we can see thematic unity between women in plight and slaves in servitude, a ‘clear parallel between the institution of slavery and the institution of marriage’ (xxii). Joyce Green MacDonald disagrees with this view, stressing the difference between ‘being’ treated as ‘a commodity’ and ‘actually being a commodity’ (556).

company's attitude:

You see, we try all Shapes, and Shifts, and Arts,
 To tempt your Favours, and regain your Hearts.
 We weep, and laugh, join mirth and grief together,
 Like Rain and Sunshine mixed, in April weather.
 Your different tastes [*sic*] divide our Poet's Cares:

One foot the Sock, together the Buskin wears: (Epilogue, 1-6)

It was in 1695, when *Oroonoko* was premiered, that Thomas Betterton led chief actors away from the United Company and started producing plays at the Lincoln's Inn Fields. Competition between the two theatre companies started again; therefore they needed to tempt and regain the audience's favor more than ever. Theatre companies had to be aware of the taste of the spectators in order to attract them. The split-plot style is inherited from Southerne's previous well-received play performed in 1694, *The Fatal Marriage*, which was also an adaptation from Aphra Behn's short novella, *The History of the Nun*. It is no wonder that Southerne and the company anticipated another success using the same genre of drama, adapted from the same original author Aphra Behn's text, in the next season.²¹ Mita Choudhury properly pointed out that 'The marketability of any product depends upon the extent to which the producer is able to accommodate the demand of the consumer' (172). To meet the audience's demand is usually the best way to be profitable for the theatre company and the playwright: in order to achieve this, the audience's taste was the crucial factor. The theatre company's strategy for producing a play was itself an interactive project, in which both the theatre company's expectation for high profit and the audience's taste were involved.

The theatre where *Oroonoko* was staged was a 'theatre of interaction' and the spectators also took some role in creating the 'social bond' among the players and those who attended the theatre. It is widely held that *Oroonoko* was well received especially by the female audience from the early productions, as *A Comparison between the Two Stages*, published in 1702, describes this play first of all as 'the Favourite of the Ladies'

²¹ Jordan and Love comments that *The Fatal Marriage* was, 'graced by superlative acting from Elizabeth Barry, the greatest triumph of Southerne's career.' (5) They cite 'a letter received by a member of the Windham family of Felbrigg' in which the addresser comments that 'I never saw Mrs. Barry act with so much passion as she does in it' (5). Finally Jordan and Love suggest us to understand *The Fatal Marriage* in 'the special vein of theatrical emotionalism of which Southerne still remains the acknowledged master' (8). I agree with them, for the theatrical emotionalism also underlies *Oroonoko*.

(19). Female spectators' reaction to the play was so conspicuous that they shed tears at the production that even a satire for them was written:

At Fate's approach whilst OROONOOKO Groans,
Imoinda's Fate, undaunted at his own;
 Dropping a generous Tear *Lucretia* Sighs,
 And views the hero with *Imoinda's* Eyes.
 When the prince strikes who envy not the Deed?
 To be so Wept, who would not wish to Bleed?²²

The poet is slightly scornful of *Lucretia*, a representative of the female audience, who weeps at the theatre. The poet represents the voice inside *Lucretia* she envies *Imoinda's* death because many of the audience members moan for her. She wants to be wept over, or seen and pitied by the spectators around her. In the theatre of interaction those who attended the theatre could perform, just like players on stage, their passions. Passions were made visible not only on the stage through players acting, but also on the seats where the Ladies sat. Southern *Oroonoko* offered the audience an appropriate occasion in which they could show their sensibilities by weeping for the plight of the hero and the heroine.

What needs to be observed is the core of the sensibility shown by the audience's tears, which were triggered by the sad ending of blacked up *Oroonoko* and white *Imoinda*. The theatre company succeeded in providing a scene in which *Oroonoko* and *Imoinda* become simpler objects upon which female spectators can discharge the pity and sympathy which are their emotional reserve in *Oroonoko's* colonialist theatre. (MacDonald, 558) The audience could weep themselves out, discharging their emotions over the sad story served by the theatre company and performed through players' histrionics. We need to remember once again the fact that *Imoinda* was made into a white in this performance. The story from which the audience could get pleasure was composed not of a royal black couple sold into slavery but of a pair of a black hero and a white heroine. Mita Choudhury acutely suggests:

In the popular imagination, the story of slavery is sordid if not distasteful and certainly distant something that happens elsewhere. In performance the medium in which Behn's history was ritualized in the

²² John Whaley, 'On a Young Lady's weeping at Oroonooko [sic]', *A Collection of Poems*. London, 1732. 92-93, cited in Spencer 237.

eighteenth century the message that tends to get conveyed is often the message that the spectator wants to receive. (172)

The collective opinion conveyed by the play and also required by the audience the message that the spectator wants to receive was that the black couple in distress needed to be translated into a different form so that the people attending could share a moving experience and the audience could weep themselves out in order to show their sensibilities. A story of a black couple, both of them dying in the British colony, needed to be translated into a miscegenetic one to create a community for sharing a moving experience.²³ Moving for whom? Of course, for the small community that mainly or almost exclusively consists of white English people. The black couple of the Behn's original could not be the objects of pity in this play and thus blackness became the object of manipulation a black heroine was made invisible.

To summarize, the condition under which Southerne's *Oroonoko* was performed and also under which Imoinda was made white arises from the interactive relationship between the theatre company and the audience. At the beginning of the renewed competition with their rival company, Southerne and the Drury Lane Company needed to be aware of the audience's taste. On the other hand, the spectators had several expectations that needed to be met by the production company. The audience wanted to consume their favorite players, and they wanted a story that would provide them with a moving experience. They also expected to be seen by other people attending. It is not difficult to imagine that there were few actresses who, knowing the connotation of color, would dare to black up their faces, their faces being, in fact, the main attraction for at least some of the audience. Nor would the theatre company have thought it profitable. The troupe tried to offer what the audience would want to see, and the spectators expected to get satisfaction from the offering. The theatre company's strategy to attract people was to provide the audience with an opportunity to share a touching experience, as in the last scene where especially the women in the audience could shed tears to show their sensibilities, or just their faces, to other spectators. In the eighteenth century

²³ Miscegenetic couples consisting of a black man and a white woman, as in the case of *Othello*, have a long theatrical tradition and Virginia Mason Vaughan suggests that 'By the 1670s Londoners were probably more familiar with the products of cross-racial liaisons than their forebears though not surprisingly these dramas portray anxieties about miscegenation' (138).

theatre, everyone could get satisfaction from the production of *Oroonoko* only when the reality of slavery was distorted and appropriated for the profit of a theatre company and the happiness of the spectator. Passions were thought to be universal, but a particular way of performing was needed in order to share them among the people attending the theatre: a white woman instead of a black as a medium of 'universal' passion. The project to make passion visible, both on the stage and in the seats of a theatre, was intertwined with a particular ideology which required making a black woman invisible on the stage. By observing the theatricality of *Oroonoko*, which was an important part of eighteenth century theatre, we can witness a function of the theatre as an ideology apparatus.²⁴ An ideology seeking to make profits by appropriating a group of people, namely black women, was generated and circulated through the performances of *Oroonoko* in the eighteenth century theatre.²⁵

²⁴ We can assume that the repeated productions of *Oroonoko* throughout the eighteenth century were also significant for the regenerating and confirming this ideology. Virginia Mason Vaughan, adapting Judith Butler's concept of performativity, argues that 'theatrical performance' helps to construct our conceptions of race and gender because it shares 'performativity's' 'repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.' (3) For Butler, 'repeated stylization of the body' (45) or, more accurately, 'how to repeat' (202) is important because 'a radical proliferation of gender' (203) enables us 'to displace' the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself. (203) Butler realizes not only the possibility of changing 'a highly rigid regulatory frame' (45), or gender norms, but also the risk of confirming them through 'the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts' (45). It can be said that repeated productions of whitened Imoinda, a version of 'repeated stylization of the body' worked to performatively regenerate and circulate a sort of ideology through the theatre.

²⁵ John Ferriar's *The Prince of Angola* was a part of the project of the anti-slavery movement. This paradox 'that a text which has a racist attitude at the fundamental level was adopted into the anti-slavery movement' needs to be considered, though such a work is beyond my aim of this paper.

.OROONOKO.



Barthele ad viv. del.

Gripmon sculp.

MR. SAVIGNY in the Character of OROONOKO.

Oro. I'll turn my Face away, and do it so. ~

Published Nov. 23. 1776 by J. & P. Curles & Partners

Illustration 1 Frontispiece from *Oroonoko* (London, 1776)

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