SOURCING SOUTHERNE: ORIGINS OF THE TRAGIC PLOT IN
THOMAS SOUTHERNE'S OROONOKO
by
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Although certainly indebted to Aphra Behn’s novella of the same name, Thomas Southerne’s Oroonoko draws inspiration for its Restoration hero, as well as additional characters and themes, from Marc Antony as depicted in John Dryden’s All for Love and Nathaniel Bacon as in Behn’s The Widdow Ranter.
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Even the most intensive criticism of Thomas Southerne’s 1695 play, *Oroonoko*, has failed to recognize the debt that the tragicomedy owes to prior dramatic works, namely Aphra Behn’s *The Widdow Ranter* and John Dryden’s *All for Love*. Previous study of Thomas Southerne’s *Oroonoko* and its relationship to earlier works has relied upon the play’s obvious dependence on Aphra Behn’s novel of the same name. Critics have long focused on making increasingly detailed connections between Southerne’s and Behn’s depiction of events. Some scholars, such as Ferguson, Elmore and Barthelemy have tried to connect Southerne’s white Imoinda to Behn herself and to Shakespeare’s Desdemona, as well as compare Oroonoko with Othello. However, close intertextual study of the play itself -- the characters, themes, and relationships between them -- provide deeper insight into Southerne’s true inspiration for his most popular and enduring play.

Southerne does not merely transfer the characters and events of Behn’s novel from page to stage. Rather than model his tragic hero on Behn’s (or even Shakespeare’s) fictional heroes, Southerne turned instead to historic
heroes of the real world. The classical Marc Antony provides much of Oroonoko’s personality, including his relationships with his underlings and lover, while the more contemporary Nathaniel Bacon is the model for the concept of righteous rebellion, as well as the idea of flexibility in colonial class structure. Through their dramatic counterparts, in All for Love and The Widdow Ranter, these two real-life tragic heroes provide the basis for Southerne’s version of Oroonoko and the events surrounding the titular character.

As the earliest of the works in consideration, Dryden’s All for Love, first presented in 1677, is just as much a reflection of its time as the plays The Widdow Ranter, published in 1689 after Aphra Behn’s death, and Oroonoko reflect theirs. While maintaining similarities in their characters, the latter two plays differ from All for Love in their treatment of colonialism and social classes. Though all three dramas exist in a foreign or exotic land, All for Love takes place entirely within Egypt as it exists within the Roman Empire, analogous to the British Empire.
Accordingly, within the confines of the play, Dryden emphasizes the importance of a rigid class structure.

Antony and Cleopatra, as members of the noble, ruling class, are the natural heroes of the play. Lower class characters such as Ventidius and Alexas may be temporarily given noble characteristics, but their status is dependent upon their association with Antony and Cleopatra. Heroism and honor are not required of these lower class characters as they are of the play’s heroic couple. This rigid class structure is maintained in Behn’s *Oroonoko*. Oroonoko’s natural nobility grants him the role of hero, despite his situational and racial subservience. Imoinda too, is a higher breed of woman than the wives of the other lower-class-by-birth slaves.

However, as time progresses, this rigid class structure begins to exhibit increasing flexibility. By the time Behn’s *The Widdow Ranter* was posthumously produced in 1689, there was some flexibility in class movement, as well as the revolutionary idea that the emergence of a middle class allows for the possibility that heroes can be formed by character and actions, rather than birth. The play
explores this concept in the heroic -- but not nobly born -- characters of Daring, Fearless and Bacon himself. These men defend the honor of the women and fight honorably against their enemies. However, not all members of this middle class are inherently good. The civil servants such as Dullman, Whiff and Boozer make good on their names. In providing these examples of a corruptible civil authority with no underlying system of morals, Behn shows that unlike the inherently heroic nobles and the inherently disgraceful peasants, members of the middle class may embody either of these two extremes.

Southerne’s play, first performed in 1695, builds on this process. The prominence of the middle class Aboan and his importance in persuading Oroonoko to revolt acts as a nod to this idea of the possibility of middle class heroism. Similarly, Southerne shows the corruptibility of power in the hands of those not born to leadership when his Governor betrays Oroonoko, goes back on his word, and attempts to rape Imoinda. Despite this seeming acquiescence to currently popular ideas, including the possibility of heroism in lower classes as well as the corruption of civil
leaders, Southerne’s Oroonoko is far less politically controversial than either Behn’s Oroonoko or The Widdow Ranter. With his addition of the comic plot, Southerne dilutes the strength of these political arguments. The Welldon sisters, though seemingly well-born, behave lewdly. Furthermore, Southerne’s Oroonoko, as previously mentioned, is far less an example of the noble hero than Dryden’s Antony or Behn’s Oroonoko. Finally, despite its setting in the New World, most of the play’s action could occur anywhere and its colonial setting is less a result of political commentary on class mobility in the colonies rather than playing to the theatre-goers’ appreciation of transatlantic locales.

Even as Southerne considered the inclusion or excision of Behn’s frequently controversial politics in adapting her Oroonoko for the stage, he must also have considered the differences between the reading of a romance novel and the viewing of a play. In changing a novel into a drama, a playwright must consider the needs of his audience, as well as the potential limitations of the production company’s technical capabilities. Richard Bevis discusses numerous
examples of this Restoration period novel-into-drama adaptation and the reasons for it. He also considers the particular concerns a playwright may have in producing a theatrical work:

Drama being the most social of the arts, dramatists also reflected the prejudices and preferences of their chief patrons, the court circle and the concerns of the citizens and gentry who frequented the theatres (1).

John Dryden himself noted this influence on the tastes of the day, writing that opinion could often be ascribed “to the Court; and, in it, particularly to the King” (qtd. in Bevis: 31). Furthermore in his epilogue to Oroonoko, Southerne blames his audience for the necessity of adding a comedic underplot, when he writes that the theatergoers’ “different tastes divide [the] poet’s cares” (Epilogue, 5). Still, Dryden himself “once claimed that ‘he never writ anything for [himself] but Antony and Cleopatra’,” so perhaps he cared less for the audience’s desire for judgment than for his own wish for classic tragedy (Caldwell, 218).
A dual plotline convention, particularly the combination of comedic and dramatic stories, was common in Restoration Drama. Dryden made extensive use of the concept -- although not in *All for Love* -- and *The Widdow Ranter* employs it, as did Southerne in several of his other plays. In *Oroonoko*, the addition of the comedic Welldon sisters plot is easily understood to be the comedic counterpart to the dramatic storyline -- the humorous interpretation and even satire of person-as-commodity and wife-as-foil-to-male-hero dramatic story. Furthermore, Mita Choudhury comments on Southerne’s addition of the play’s comic plot, saying that this additional storyline “seeks to provide a sharply contrasting background to the grandeur of the tragedy,” as well as to highlight and set off the “trials and tribulations of a larger-than-life hero” (172). Certainly, the everyday worries and risqué humor of the Welldon sisters provide this counterpoint to the grand, sweeping emotions of the tragic plot. However, beginning with Hawkesworth in 1759, adaptations of Southerne’s *Oroonoko* regularly removed the Welldon sisters plot from the play altogether. Hawksworth declared “his revision of
Southerne’s play is an ‘attempt’ to ‘render Oroonoko a regular Tragedy of five acts” (Widmayer, 206).

The comic plot follows common conventions of Restoration plays, including cross-dressing, bawdy humor, and mistaken identity resulting in neat marital pairings at its conclusion. The tragic plot, with its conflict between love and duty, mixed-race marriage, betrayal by colonial authorities, and flexibility of noble characterization despite racial or social norms provides far more interesting material for critical study.

For inspiration or emulation to occur, some awareness of earlier works must exist on the part of the imitator. Southerne was a contemporary and even friendly collaborator with Dryden. Each man wrote several prologues and epilogues for each other’s plays. Southerne boasted to having completed Dryden’s Cleomenes at the latter’s request when Dryden fell ill. Dryden is thought to have not only written the prologue and epilogue for Southerne’s Oroonoko, but also to have produced Southerne’s first play The Persian Prince or The Loyal Brother in 1682 (Hartnell). Dryden also provided both prologue and epilogue for Behn’s The Widdow
Ranter. Furthermore, according to The London Stage, All for Love enjoyed revivals in 1685 and 1694, as well as a reprint in 1692, which makes it all the more likely that Southerne would be aware of and familiar with the work (265 and passim). Consequently, it comes as no surprise that Dryden’s body of work overtly inspired Southerne’s. Behn’s influence on Southerne is just as clear. Southerne’s two most famous dramas The Fatal Marriage and Oroonoko were both adapted from Behn novels. It is apparent that even if Behn and Southerne never actually met -- unlikely given the intimacy of Restoration literary circles -- that Southerne was certainly aware of Behn and her work.

In Oroonoko, Southerne follows much of the African-prince-as-New-World-slave-leader storyline set forth in Behn’s romance. However, some significant changes have been made. In noting and discussing some of the differences and similarities between Southerne’s production Oroonoko and Behn’s novella, along with the character similarities and differences between Southerne’s hero Oroonoko, and Dryden’s Antony, it becomes equally necessary to study potential reasons for why such adaptations were made.
One reason for these changes is the additional prominence a character can achieve in a stage performance as opposed to within the pages of a book. Southerne himself, in his own preface, wonders why Behn would “bury her favorite hero in a novel when she might have revived him in the scene” (dedication, 19). Clearly, Southerne initially intended to rework the Oroonoko novel so that the titular character could gain more prominence. Referring to these changes, Jessica Munns comments that “Southerne’s and later adaptations of Oroonoko … do not so much bring to light the dramatic materials buried in the novella, as engage in a process of excision and substitution” (174). Munns plainly sees through Southerne’s implication that he desired only to increase Oroonoko’s standing within the narrative without essentially changing the storyline. She points out what is obvious to consumers of the drama -- that Southerne readily deletes whatever he wishes, and substitutes alternative scenes of his own choosing without regard to Oroonoko’s stature within the resulting drama. Through this process, despite Southerne’s own claim to desire more prominence for his hero, he obscures Oroonoko’s
importance with the addition of the comic Welldon sisters plotline.¹

While there are numerous differences between the Oroonokos throughout both book and play -- not least of which are the addition of the previously mentioned comic plotline and the complete excision of Behn’s African backstory -- most noteworthy, perhaps, are the differences in the climax of the story itself: the slave revolt and the eventual deaths of Imoinda and Oroonoko. In these sections of the story, there are similarities and differences in both the action of each scene and in what each reveals about Oroonoko’s character.

Behn’s Oroonoko is not only mentally and emotionally heroic, he is also a physical ideal. He is simultaneously the epitome of African nobility, and attractive by European standards as well. Oroonoko has “a shape the most exact that can be fancied” (Behn, 80). More specifically, “his

¹ Interestingly, to some minor extent even Southerne’s Welldon sisters are inspired by Behn’s The Widdow Ranter, which her publisher dedicated to Behn’s personal friend, “the much Honoured Madam Welldon.” Much speculation has been made as to “Madam Welldon’s” identity, including theories that she was a respectable personal friend of Behn’s or that she was a well-known London a prostitute (Beach, footnote 34).
nose was rising and Roman” and “his mouth [had] the finest shape that could be seen” (81). For Behn, “Oroonoko’s ultimate or perfect blackness is a sign of his exceptional status and his aesthetic purity” (Visconsi, 690). Behn describes at length Oroonoko’s noble mien, natural leadership qualities, innate nobility, and superior intellect in terms that recall such Romans as Marc Antony. With limited examples of noble-looking Africans in their midst, Behn’s audience would require this lengthy description before accepting Oroonoko as a physical paragon.

Southerne’s version of the character, while still very physically appealing, is more realistic both physically and emotionally. Though he is initially described by the widow as a “prince” (I.ii.46), the slaver-captain immediately dismisses Oroonoko’s superiority, telling the widow that she will “find him no more than a common man at [her] business” (I.ii.48-49). Still, Blanford pays deference to the slave-prince and Oroonoko himself claims there is a “nobler part of me” (I.ii.254). Rather than outright stating Oroonoko’s nobility and superiority over others --
as the drama does not describe Oroonoko's physical presence, nor his inner characteristics -- Southerne apparently depended upon costuming and acting to relay the character’s dignity and quality. Oroonoko’s originator, John Verbruggen, was a prominent and experienced dramatic actor, accustomed to leading roles. Verbruggen was considered by contemporary theatre critics “wild and untaught and consequently good ... as the unpolished hero Oroonoko” (Highfill, 136). In fact, Verbruggen was recommended for the role of Oroonoko on the basis of his reputation as an “unpolish’d Hero [who] wou’d do it best” (Highfill, 135). Verbruggen had previously played other blackface roles, including that of Othello, and was considered the perfect actor for this sort of role. Consequently, Southerne needed to spend little effort presenting Oroonoko as noble and worthy -- either physically or internally -- with such an actor portraying the role.

In contrast, in her play The Widdow Ranter Behn grants her dramatic hero overt recognition of his impressive qualities when Friendly describes Nathaniel Bacon as
a man indeed above the common rank, by nature generous, brave resolv’d, and daring; who studying the lives of the Romans and great men, that have raised themselves to the most elevated fortunes, fancies it easy for ambitious men, to aim at any pitch of glory (4).

Joyce Green MacDonald details numerous revisions Southerne made to Behn’s physical descriptions of her male and female leads. For example, while Behn goes into great detail regarding Oroonoko’s heroically unattainable noble looks, Southerne’s Oroonoko is more human and more approachable -- perhaps to make him more accessible for theatrical audience members. “The blackness of both characters is erased, divided, subsumed ...- an African prince [faces] a series of increasingly formalized and ritualized performances of subjection” (MacDonald, 25). This subjugation dehumanizes the otherwise noble and dangerously powerful black leader. Audiences cannot pity or sympathize with a character they fear -- the new transatlantic climate had reawakened this latent European dread -- but in this reduced state, Oroonoko becomes accessible to the audience.
Another, and perhaps the most significant, alteration in the physicality of the main characters involves the character of Oroonoko’s wife, Imoinda. To Behn, Imoinda is a “beautiful black Venus” (81), but Southerne writes her as the white daughter of a white general (II.ii.71-90). Imoinda’s racial change allows for easy and obvious comparisons between Southerne’s Oroonoko and Othello. Both feature strong African male leads married to white women. And while it is likely that Southerne changed Imoinda’s race in order to strengthen the parallels between Oroonoko and Othello as characters, there were other factors contributing to this alteration.

With transatlantic trade and colonization booming not just in real life but literature as well, the trope of the “noble savage” was well-established for Restoration readers and audiences. Additionally, these Restoration authors made use of prevalent notions of the subversive, even dangerous, nature of life in foreign lands, including the colonies. It is no accident that all of these works take place far from England. Only in a faraway land can an African prince safely attract the admiration of a white general’s
daughter. Only in Egypt, far from the home-base of Rome can Antony idly neglect his official duties (and wives) while he wallows in luxury and Cleopatra’s loving embrace. Only in Virginia can Bacon and an Indian princess fall in love, for “the God of Love reigns” in America (Behn, 2).

During dramatic depictions of these exotic locales and characters, it was not uncommon for actors to don blackface and appear in feathered and beaded regalia in order to evoke the exoticism and foreign allure of these characters and places. However, it was far less desirable for actresses to obscure their faces with dark face paint. Jenifer Elmore makes several arguments for the changing of Imoinda to a white European, including Dodd’s 1933 argument that “any man may desire a white woman, but only a black man could possibly desire a black woman” (38). It may have been too shocking or unbelievable for a Restoration colonial governor to be depicted openly chasing and lusting after a black slave woman. At the very least, acknowledging this sort of lust openly on-stage would seem to sanction the unspoken reality of slave rape by white colonial masters. Elmore argues for a whitened Imoinda, saying “that
appearing in blackface was simply taboo for women -- but not for men -- on the Restoration stage" (38). Fair complexions were commonly valued as inherently more beautiful than dark skin. After all, wealthy and noble women avoided labor outdoors and were able to protect their skin, whereas working class and poor women were subjected to the sun and elements, which roughened and darkened their coloring. Consequently, Southerne “probably believed that conventionally beautiful white actresses were simply more appealing to audiences than those same actresses in black makeup” (Elmore, 38).

In addition to playing to actresses’ vanities on stage and the notions of beauty held by Restoration audiences, Southerne may have changed Imoinda’s race in order to titillate audiences. Interracial romance onstage would certainly draw attention to the play and bring in theatregoers to witness the shocking relationship. Furthermore, Margaret Ferguson argues that the whitened version of Imoinda is, in fact, an analog for Behn herself. After publishing her Oroonoko, Behn was assumed to be the narrator of the work, and her fascination with the noble
and physically perfect Oroonoko was often implied to be a sexual attraction -- "a notoriety which Behn herself may have helped fashion" (Ferguson, 38).

Whether or not he intended his white Imoinda to represent Behn, Southerne was aware of the "cultural prestige of Othello’s drama of miscegenous romance" (Ferguson, 38). Even the frontispieces of early published editions of Oroonoko prominently feature one of the most suggestive interracial moments in the play as a very black Oroonoko stands poised to stab a very white Imoinda in the chest. With news undoubtedly trickling back to London of shipboard slave revolts, as well as plots and rebellions in the colonies throughout the early 1690s, this image of an armed African man threatening a helpless white woman would be all the more inflammatory (Holloway). If publishers of the work recognized the significance of this moment in the play and used its scandalously suggestive image to garner attention, surely Southerne was also aware of the potential publicity and ticket sales that an interracial marriage would gain him. Even though her Imoinda is black, Behn too made use of interracial scandal in her play The Widdow
Ranter when Bacon falls “in love with the young Indian Queen,” providing yet another commonality between the two heroes (4).

While much attention is paid to the heroes of these various texts, additional parallels can be drawn between all three of our tragic heroines. Dryden's Cleopatra, Behn's Indian Queen Semernia, and both versions of Imoinda are described as physical paragons of beauty. All who see them are affected by their grace and physical splendor. This results in all three attracting attention from men other than our heroes, their tragic counterparts. Before meeting Antony, Cleopatra has already been paired with Caesar and even her brother Ptolemy. Semernia despairs that she loves Bacon even while she is married to another, “What pitty 'tis I saw the General, before my fate had given me to the king” (38). Imoinda, too, was claimed by another before Oroonoko could claim her for his own. Prior to meeting Oroonoko, she was taken as part of his father’s harem. Desiring her for himself, Oroonoko ravishes her and steals her away. Throughout the novella and the play, all
men who see her, desire her. The three heroines are largely depicted as objects for men’s longing and possession.

In addition to breaking social norms by engaging in interracial relationships, setting the stories in the Colonial foreignness of Surinam and Virginia allowed Southerne and Behn to engage audiences by joining spectators together in the greatest shared fear of the transatlantic culture: the savagely barbaric natives of the New World. Even though he is a slave and member of an uncivilized culture himself, the enslaved and therefore nominally civilized Oroonoko poses less of a threat to the Surinam colonists than that of the “wild” local Indian tribes. The Indians attack and capture Imoinda even as Oroonoko is to be chained. Rather than binding Oroonoko, the planters give him a weapon instead. Oroonoko fights boldly, vanquishing the Indians, all in the name of Imoinda’s defense, for “a lover cannot fall more glorious than in the cause of love” (II.iii.145-146).

In The Widdow Ranter, Bacon reluctantly bears arms against the Indian enemy. His “country’s good has forc’d [him] to assume a soldier’s life: and ‘tis with much regret
that [he] employ the first effects of it against [his] friends” (13). He respects the Indian King and loves the Indian Queen, but the defense of the colony outweighs his personal feelings for the tribe. Still, the Indians remain the enemy as they “fall to massacring [the colonists] wherever [they] lie exposed to them” (3). The Jamestown Council suspects Bacon’s war with the Indians is, like Oroonoko’s fight against the Indians, waged less to protect the colonists and more because Bacon “intends to kill the King her husband [and] establish himself in her heart” (8). While the colonists -- and English theater-goers -- shiver in fear of the marauding Indians, the two heroes act less out of self-preservation or defense of English colonists than out of personal feelings of love.

Even so, for Behn, Oroonoko is a man of achievement. His natural nobility, innate awareness of leadership, and overwhelming sense of honor lead to decisive actions. In the novel, the slave revolt is entirely Oroonoko’s idea. He appeals to the slaves’ dignity and sense of injustice, “counting up all their toils and sufferings ... like dogs that like the whip and bell” (126). Similarly, Behn’s Bacon
is aware of others’ suffering, asking “Shou’d I stand by and see my country ruin’d, my king dishonour’d, and his subjects murder’d, hear the sad crys of widdows and orphans?” (Behn, 24). Even as Oroonoko points out their own suffering, the slaves resist the idea; one named Tuscan even protests that the slave men cannot revolt and leave their families behind. Oroonoko quickly counters that any virtuous wife would gladly follow her husband into unknown dangers. Tuscan then enumerates the trials they face in the wilderness of Surinam, describing the “impassable woods, mountains and bogs...not only difficult lands to overcome, but rivers to wade” (127). This parallels Bacon’s depiction of the nature of rebellion, living in hardship, “worn out by summers heats and winters colds, march’d tedious days and nights thro bogs and fens” (34). Despite warning of these difficulties, Oroonoko’s slaves and Bacon’s fellow colonists quickly succumb and bow to these naturally charismatic leaders, ready to follow each of them into whatever perils await.

Kaufman sums up some differences between the two Oroonoko characters, writing, “While Behn’s Oroonoko is a
fierce, ranting violent man, Southerne’s is philosophical, articulate and civilized.” Due to his more humanitarian, ambivalent nature, Southerne’s Oroonoko requires substantial convincing before he undertakes leading a mutiny against the plantation owners. In Behn’s version of events, Oroonoko’s dearest friend, Aboan, remains behind in Africa; however, Southerne’s Oroonoko is reunited with Aboan in Surinam. Aboan is first introduced in Act III, scene 1 wherein he, Hottmann, and an unnamed slave meet to organize a slave revolt -- a meeting held entirely without Oroonoko’s involvement. Blanford enters, interrupting them, and asks the gathered slaves if any of them “did belong to Oroonoko” (III.i.33). Aboan asserts that he “did belong to him” (III.i.35), changing the relationship between the two Africans from that of egalitarian friendship, to that of leader and devoted servant. And, indeed, when the two men are reunited, Aboan greets Oroonoko not as a companion, but as an underling greets his superior.

This altered dynamic between the two further emphasizes Oroonoko’s reluctance to lead the slaves in revolt. After Blanford leaves the scene, Aboan begins
working on Oroonoko, attempting to convince the prince to lead the remaining slaves in revolt against their masters. Oroonoko is a reluctant leader despite his continually described supposed natural nobility and authority. Again and again he deflects his subordinate’s arguments, until finally, 150 lines later, Aboan finally rouses “the lion in his den” (III.ii.206). Throughout the scene, Aboan -- the supposedly lesser man -- initiates, argues, and defends the slave’s right to mutiny, while Oroonoko -- the apparent leader and authority figure -- demurs, questions, and doubts the slaves’ cause.

First, Aboan beseeches Oroonoko that “the toils, the labors, weary drudgeries which [the slave owners] impose” are “burdens more fit for ... senseless beasts to bear than thinking men” (III.ii.122-123). This argument falls on deaf ears, likely because -- though he sometimes bemoans his slavish status -- Oroonoko is never depicted as participating in any sort of physical labor. Neither Behn’s nor Southerne’s Oroonokos are field hands or drudges. The dramatic Oroonoko describes his slavery as a “load so light, so little to be felt” (III.ii.116). Still, despite
both characters being afforded comforts denied other slaves -- such as the “gentlemanly adventures of tiger-hunting, eel-grabbing, and upriver ethnographic fieldwork,” Behn’s Oroonoko is quick to lead, while Southerne’s resists insurrection (Visconsi, 688).

Similarly (to Oroonoko), in Dryden’s All for Love Antony is divided by his desire to do what he reasons is right (honor) and what he feels is right (love). In titling this play, Dryden makes it implicitly clear what motivates Antony and Cleopatra. Everything they do throughout the play and later when they die, they do it All for Love. In dramatic terms, Antony fails to lead his armies and to tend to his rightful wife, Caesar’s sister Octavia. Antony is immobilized by his indecision. On the one hand he loves Cleopatra and longs to remain with her in embrace after embrace; but, on the other hand, he has a spurned wife and an insulted brother-in-law (in the form of Caesar himself) with which to deal. Rather than contend with either one, Antony rants and despairs that he can neither see Cleopatra, nor can he lead the army.
Antony parallels Oroonoko in several important ways. He is a once-strong leader of men who is emasculated by his love for a beautiful woman. He is a civilized man with a history of honor and decency, who is overshadowed by a savage and uncivilized nature. And, he depends on the strength of his followers’ persuasion to finally spur him into the actions he should have undertaken independently. Both men also live in relative comfort despite their relocation to foreign and less civilized lands.

For theatrical audiences, tragic heroes must naturally be flawed characters. Offsetting their natural nobility or superior position, there must necessarily be some sort of innate fault or at least lapse in leadership -- without which the tragedy cannot occur. Restoration playwrights wrote their plays in a traditionally classical format, particularly their tragedies. This “fatal flaw” was a necessary part of the Restoration tragic hero.

Aboan taunts Oroonoko who does not seem to even understand that his companion is hinting at rebellion, saying “Another time you would have found it sooner, but I see Love has your heart and takes up all your thoughts”
(III.ii.65-67). This is the first overt mention of Oroonoko’s major inner conflict (the classic struggle for many Restoration heroes) between love and duty, romantic passion and manly honor.

Within the scope of this argument, it is Aboan, not Oroonoko, who mirrors the earlier colonial hero, Nathaniel Bacon. After Aboan argues that the slaves outnumber the masters by more than double, Oroonoko limply wonders what can be done. Aboan responds that the slaves would “cut [their] oppressors’ throats” (III.ii.84), and Oroonoko declares it murder. Aboan attempts to persuade Oroonoko by using a Lockean approach, calling the revolt “justified by self-defence [sic] and natural liberty” (III.ii.87-88), but still Oroonoko refuses to be party to the plan, let alone lead others in the struggle. Bacon uses the same sort of natural right to violence for protection when he defends his actions, asking, “Is it unlawful to defend myself against a thief that breaks into my doors?” (24).

After the argument with Aboan, Southerne’s Oroonoko claims to feel the chains upon him, but unlike Behn’s hero, sees the masters as innocent players in an economic system
which just happens to allow the purchase and ownership of other humans -- much as he himself used to do as a prince in Africa. Rather, this Oroonoko reserves his hatred for the sea captain who originally enslaved him, not fairly through warfare or honest commerce, but through trickery. If Oroonoko represents Southerne's opinion on the institution of slavery, both character and playwright seem to accept slavery as a necessary part of the colonial economy, as long as slaves are captured in a fair and honest manner. However, this may not be Southerne’s personal opinion, but rather a politically neutral stance affected to negate the effect a controversial political stance might have on ticket sales.

To conclude his argument, seeing that Oroonoko’s chains chafe less than his own, Aboan begins to describe the hardships faced by other slaves. He rails against the “bloody cruelties” imposed upon the slaves by their masters, imploring that “many wretches lift their hands and eyes to [Oroonoko] for relief” (III.ii.129-130). This again resembles Behn’s argument justifying Bacon’s rebellion. Apparently the colony remained peaceful “Till the
grievances grew so high that the whole country flockt to him and beg’d he would redress them” (4). In these moments, Behn seems to approve of slavery as long as the masters' treatment of their slaves is humane and fair.

However, while Oroonoko claims pity for his fellow suffering slaves and the wish to do more for them, he doubts that he can do anything to help them. He doubts himself and he worries about their chances for success. He is unwilling to gamble his current life for an unknown future. With Imoinda present -- but largely silent -- for the entire scene, Oroonoko embraces her and expresses gratitude for her presence in his life. Aboan challenges Oroonoko, wondering if Oroonoko intends to forsake the callings of his noble lineage for a life of ease and forgetfulness “in the arms of love” (III.ii.148).

Much as Southerne’s Aboan prods Oroonoko into action, Dryden’s Ventidius breaks in on Antony’s anguished reverie. Antony’s General Ventidius must reproach Antony for failing in his soldierly and marital duties for the sake of Cleopatra’s love. After commenting that this romantic relationship will lead Antony to Antony’s own “gaudy
slaughter,” (I.i.171), Ventidius chastises his leader for allowing himself to become unmanned by a woman and by emotion. The general comments on Antony’s weakness -- to Cleopatra’s eunuch no less -- that Cleopatra “has decked his ruin with her love .... [leaving] him the blank of what he was,” that “she has quite unmanned him.” He says that Antony has been “altered from the lord of half mankind / unbent, unsinewed, made a woman’s Toy” (I.i.169-177). It seems that Antony, like Southerne’s Oroonoko, would prefer to live a life of ease and forgetfulness “in the arms of love” (Southerne, III.ii.148).

At last Imoinda speaks up, joining in Aboan’s argument that Oroonoko’s “illustrious lineage” will follow him into slavery to “pamper up” the pride of the masters who know they own “the heirs of empire” (III.ii.150-152). This argument ultimately hits home for Oroonoko who is horrified at the thought of his noble offspring raised as a slave. Still, he questions the right of slaves to revolt, before finally Aboan points out that the new governor’s arrival poses a threat to Imoinda — that the “young, luxurious, passionate and amorous” man will undoubtedly ravish Imoinda
at the earliest opportunity. At long last, when his wife is threatened, Southerne’s Oroonoko is roused to action. Not for any desire for liberty or noble yearning for the rights of his people does Oroonoko agree to lead the slaves, but rather for the jealous and selfish reason of keeping Imoinda to himself. This Oroonoko is far less righteous than Behn’s. And, even as he commands Aboan to assemble the strongest slaves for a mutinous revolt, he cautions that “the means that leads us to our liberty must not be bloody” (III.ii.233). Even once provoked, this ambivalent Oroonoko remains a “roused lion” with claws couched. This entire scene elevates Aboan to the role of leader and military strategist, while reducing the hero Oroonoko tragically from Behn’s robust leader to an indecisive, even hesitant, tragic hero along the lines of Dryden’s Mark Antony.

In All for Love, the first mention of Antony deals not with his military leadership or even his prowess as Cleopatra’s lover, but rather with his recent naval defeat at Actium -- a defeat that occurs when the general inexplicably turns his fleet from battle to follow Cleopatra’s fleeing navy. Antony anguishes over this defeat
and the cause of it -- his slavish devotion to Cleopatra. He separates himself physically from her, hoping to cure himself of his love for her. The defeat finally causes him to realize the depth of his attachment to Cleopatra and how his honor and duty suffer because of the love he feels for her. Antony has been made brutally aware of his own tragic flaw -- the conflict within him between his duty and love.

Behn’s Bacon in The Widdow Ranter also illustrates this idea of love’s emasculating effect. “From the moment [he] beheld [the Queen’s] eyes, [his] stubborn heart melted to compliance, and from a nature rough and turbulent, grew soft and gentle as the god of love” (Behn, 16). Still, of these heroes, Bacon alone acts when he should without any nudging insistence from any others. For Southerne’s Oroonoko, Imoinda (despite her embodiment of the “love” side of Oroonoko’s bipolar indecision) and Aboan must speak up to motivate their leader, as Ventidius does for Antony. The two heroes do not lead on their own or act of their own volition, nor for their own purposes. Both of these pairs
also seem to hearken back to Iago instigating emotional responses and ultimately action in Othello.

Even as he anguishes over this inner conflict, Antony fancies himself “turned wild, a commoner of nature” who would spend his life “in a shady forest’s sylvan scene” rather than return to his orderly and civilized Roman life (I.254-256). Antony imagines himself the sort of noble savage Oroonoko personifies. Even as this hero longs for a simpler, savage life, the “uncivilized” Oroonoko often wonders at the lack of honor and common courtesies practiced among the “civilized” white Christians which surround him. Antony, too, seeks relief from the trials of his urbane and cultured existence as he escapes into his rustic fantasy. Bacon, too, spends much of his own narrative outdoors. Despite his birth as a white Christian, he, as a skilled outdoorsman, is as much a noble savage as the Indian Queen he loves.

Once the slave mutiny is underway, Behn’s novel and Southerne’s drama continue to deviate from each other. Behn has the Governor’s men easily track the slaves. Oroonoko orders the slaves into a defensive position, but already
the women begin to beg their men to yield to the oncoming English. Imoinda does not join their pleas, but rather shoots and injures the Governor, herself. This image is repeated in *The Widdow Ranter* when Indian Queen Semernia enters the fray armed with her own bow and arrows. Eventually in Behn's *Oroonoko*, Trefry intervenes and mediates between the two parties, passing on the Governor’s assurance of pardon and leniency to the mutineers. The slaves, except for Imoinda and Tuscan, abandon Oroonoko – who the colonists see as the primary threat as soon as he joins the rebellion\(^2\). The three heroes are then betrayed and captured. Oroonoko swears revenge, but worries about leaving Imoinda behind should he die in the process.

In Southerne’s drama, much of the action unfolds the same way. Notable differences include the much more active role of the Governor, and Oroonoko’s attack on the Englishmen. When the English arrive on the scene, the

\(^2\) Similarly, despite the numerous men fighting with him, Bacon is perceived as an even greater threat than any of them – greater even than the threat of Indian attack. One councilman claims, “I do not look upon our danger to be so great from the Indians as from young Bacon” (Behn, 7). To a Restoration audience, who already fear the Indians, this would indicate a severe threat, indeed.
ship’s Captain yells to his men to attack, but despite his previously stated prohibition on bloodshed, Oroonoko strikes first and kills the Captain. After all, it is the Captain who initially tricks Oroonoko into slavery and therefore breaks the understood “correct” way to capture slaves — either through warfare or purchase. At this point, the Governor involves himself. Southerne gives the Governor long, dramatic speeches, imploring Oroonoko to yield, promising “to overlook the spilling of blood in regard to the greater public good” (IV.ii.37). These lengthy monologues provide plenty of rich dramatic moments onstage for the play's white authority figure, and allow ample opportunities for audiences to observe Oroonoko's mood changing from rebellious to capitulatory. Blanford — Southerne’s version of Behn’s Trefry character — intervenes between the two parties, and mediates Oroonoko’s surrender upon Blanford’s promise and the Governor’s word of honor. Oroonoko imagines he can see his unborn son begging for the chance to be born, and in an attempt to save his wife and their unborn son, he surrenders, only to be betrayed and captured by the devious Englishmen.
Just as Blanford mediates between Southerne’s Oroonoko and his enemy, so does Dryden’s Dollabella intervene between Antony and Cleopatra. While Cleopatra herself is not Antony’s enemy, her physical charms and emotional grasp on Antony are the rival for his duties as a war-leader and husband to Octavia. Antony initially forbids Dolabella from seeing Cleopatra. Antony sees Dolabella’s affection for Cleopatra as competition for her attention:

He took unkindly
That I forbade him from Cleopatra’s sight;
Because I fear’d he lov’d her: he confess,
He had a warmth, which, for my sake, he stifled;
(III.i.102-105)

When Dolabella knows his love for Cleopatra is harmful to his love and friendship for Antony, he departs and the two men avoid each other for years. This is similar to Behn’s Trefry admitting his attraction to Imoinda, but withdrawing when he realizes she is Oroonoko’s love. While Southerne’s Blanford describes Clemene’s/Imoinda’s beauty and charms, he does not explicitly confess a personal attraction to her, noting only that “the men are all in
love with fair Clemene” (II.iii.74) which can imply that he, too, finds her attractive. Blanford never acts on this attraction, and readily understands that Imoinda is Oroonoko’s. Accordingly, the parallel between Dolabella and Trefry/Blanford is clear.

Eventually, at Ventidius’ urging, Antony sends Dolabella to intercede with Cleopatra. Though finally committed to action, Antony, like Oroonoko, is unable to fully commit to the potential burdens of his actions -- to face Cleopatra himself. He knows that in confronting her, he risks further succumbing to her beauty and becoming immobilized once more. Later, Antony believes Dolabella has broken Antony’s trust and has wooed Cleopatra on his own behalf, rather than simply relating all of Antony’s love to her. Antony feels betrayed at the trust he places in his intermediary. Likewise, after the betrayal by the Governor and subsequent recapture of himself, Aboan, and Imoinda, Oroonoko believes that Blanford is loyal only to the Governor and the other white Christians. In The Widdow Ranter Bacon suffers betrayal at the hands of the Colonial officials, as well. Very early in the play, leaving no
doubt as to their intentions, they plot the deception openly:

Your Honours shall write a letter to Bacon, where you shall acknowledge his services, invite him kindly home and offer him a Commission for General ... as soon as he shall have render’d himself, seize him and strike off his head at the fort (8).

Dishonesty among colonial leaders was a common notion for Restoration audiences. It was well known that prisoners and other ne’er-do-wells frequently rose to power in the colonies. To counter this opinion and stave off any audience confusion regarding Blanford’s true motives, Southerne provides a scene between the Governor and Imoinda, wherein he attempts to rape her only to be thwarted by Blanford. This scene makes the Governor’s perfidy eminently clear to the Restoration audience and reinstates Blanford as perhaps the only redeemable Christian Englishman, in Oroonoko’s estimation. “He was a friend indeed to rescue thee,” Oroonoko says to Imoinda,
“And for his sake I’ll think it possible a Christian may yet be an honest man” (V.v.99-101).

Eventually the dramatic Oroonoko somewhat realigns its plot with that of the narrative version when Oroonoko and Imoinda are reunited. In both the book and the drama, Oroonoko and Imoinda must weigh the future for themselves and their unborn baby. Similarly, in both versions, after Imoinda’s urging finally counteracts still more wavering by Oroonoko, they mutually decide that Imoinda should die rather than risk her own and their baby’s servitude, entrapment, or even torture at the Governor’s hands. However, beyond these parallels, once again the two representations vary greatly.

Behn’s Oroonoko conceives his plan to sacrifice Imoinda while still in the presence of Trefry and the female narrator. They initially attempt to persuade the slave leader to spare his wife, but are quickly convinced that Oroonoko’s cause is “brave and just” (135). Oroonoko leads Imoinda into the jungle and announces his plan to her. Not only does she agree with the arrangement, but she pleads for death by Oroonoko’s hand. As she bows down
before him and awaits his strike, Oroonoko kills her quickly and then resolutely beheads her. Filled with grief, he lies down next to her, despairing for two days before attempting to rise. He remains beside her for an additional six days before being found by the Englishmen who seek him.

In Imoinda’s death scene, Southerne once again depicts a much less resolute Oroonoko. In the drama, Imoinda escapes the Governor, then runs to Oroonoko and informs him of her near-rape and Blanford’s loyalty. Oroonoko anguishes over how to protect Imoinda from this sort of depredation and she suggests that their deaths would lead to a release from this torturous slave existence. While Oroonoko struggles with what to do next, she boldly asserts that the means to avoid suffering and dishonor in slavery is that “both die and so prevent ‘em” (V.v.157). In The Widdow Ranter the Indian Queen Semernia agrees with this death before dishonor mentality, thanking Bacon as she dies in

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3 In Scene III of The Widdow Ranter, Behn provides a glimpse of how this band of English slave-hunters might behave. She presents a scene from the dishonest colonists’ viewpoint as they lie in wait to ambush Bacon and his men.
his arms: “thou’st sav’d my honour and hast given me death” (Behn, 51).

As Imoinda prepares to die, she hands her husband the dagger. When Oroonoko hesitates, Imoinda continues, noting that her husband’s tenderness prevents him from “pass[ing] this sentence” (V.v.185) of death upon her. Throughout the scene, Oroonoko continues to struggle with what must be done. Much as he has done throughout the play, he continues to waver between his desire for honor and his longing for love. Eventually, he drops the dagger as he “cannot bear it” (V.v.249). Imoinda finally takes the dagger up herself, and prepares to use it. Oroonoko resists the idea yet again and begs her to stop, taking the knife back. But as the Englishmen approach, Imoinda places her own hand over Oroonoko’s and fatally stabs herself.

Imoinda’s act of self-determination provides another link to Dryden’s Cleopatra, as both act on their own to avoid being “led in triumph through the streets, a spectacle to base plebian eyes” (Dryden, V.489-490). Unlike Shakespeare’s Desdemona who dies helplessly in bed, these women will not be used by their enemies as slaves and
trophies and so take their own lives. Even Behn’s Imoinda is a helpless victim as her Oroonoko kills her while she kneels passively before him. Southerne’s heroine much more closely resembles Dryden’s, rather than Behn’s or Shakespeare’s powerless females.

After Imoinda’s death, Southerne’s stage directions instruct Oroonoko to “[drop] his dagger as he looks on her and [throw] himself on the ground” (V.v.249) just as, after the Queen’s death in *The Widdow Ranter*, Behn directs that Bacon “weeps and lyes down by her” (51). Oroonoko weeps as the Governor’s men approach, and then gestures towards his wife’s body to explain his own desire for death.

This action and Oroonoko’s temperament also mirror that of Antony. As Antony believes Cleopatra has died, he begs Ventidius to kill him and relieve him from his pain. He lacks the resolution to kill himself. Ventidius commits his own suicide, unable to kill his beloved Antony, and unable to bear the pain of Antony’s distrust. This leaves Antony with no other choice -- no one else will give him the release of death. He must finally commit his own suicide. Even as Antony attempts to kill himself, there is
apparently still some hesitation and some doubt. He falls upon his sword, but fails to strike a fatal blow: “I’ve missed my heart. O unperforming hand!” (V.i.348). Certainly a man of Antony’s physical build and with his martial experience would have the knowledge to strike a fatal blow and the physical strength to do so, and yet he is unable to decisively complete the act.

The action in both the novel and dramatic Oroonoko moves on to the hero’s final scene: his own death. Southerne’s Oroonoko wraps up very quickly after Imoinda’s death. Oroonoko has indicated his own willingness to die and then gets right to it. As discussed earlier, inner turmoil and prolonged torture makes for titillating reading in a romance novel. However, following the climactic scene of Imoinda’s death, theatre audiences would be eager for the conclusion of the play. It is only after Imoinda is gone that Oroonoko’s indecision and “rival powers” (V.v.1) of honor and love have finally been resolved. His love is dead. It is time for revenge and the satisfaction of his honor. Consequently, Oroonoko takes the dagger and resolutely stabs the Governor and then himself. With one
final speech, “I have sent [the Governor’s] ghost to be a witness of that happiness in the next world which he denied here” (V.v.302-304), he throws himself down by Imoinda’s body and dies. This moment gives Restoration audiences the vicarious satisfaction of vanquishing the enemy, thereby avenging the lustful attempt on Imoinda’s body and honor.

After his own Queen dies in *The Widdow Ranter*, Bacon rejoins the battle between the Indians and the English colonists. Soon, Bacon faces imminent capture by the colonial officials, but rather than face imprisonment and subjugation by his enemies, Bacon takes poison and saves himself “from being a public spectacle upon the common theatre of death” (Behn, 53). These suicides allow our dramatic heroes the opportunity, in the audience’s eyes, to redeem any earlier hesitation and indecision in a final act of determination and fortitude. And, unlike Behn’s Oroonoko, who suffers a prolonged torture and serves as a gory public exhibition at the hands of his enemies, her Bacon and Southerne’s Oroonoko control -- like Southerne’s Imoinda and Dryden’s Cleopatra – their own destinies.
In Behn’s version, Oroonoko meets a much grislier and -- despite his own purposeful fortitude throughout the narrative -- much less self-determined end. He becomes the spectacle these other tragic characters avoid. As the Englishmen approach, Oroonoko, still lying beside Imoinda’s decaying body, finally manages to rise just enough to prop himself against a tree. Oroonoko bluffs that he still has the power to take them on, and no one approaches, until Oroonoko finally cuts out part of his own flesh and flings it at them before slitting his belly, disemboweling himself. Oroonoko kills his first lone attacker, but the remaining Englishmen capture him and take him to a surgeon for care.

After his recovery, Oroonoko’s protectors, Trefry and the female narrator, both depart, leaving the scene set and ready for the slave’s brutal torture and execution. The Governor sends his councilman, Bannister, to execute Oroonoko. Bannister binds the calm, pipe-smoking Oroonoko, who insists that he be tied up if Bannister intends whipping. Indeed, Bannister whips Oroonoko mercilessly before cutting off his genitals and burning them in a
nearby fire. Bannister then cuts off Oroonoko’s ears and nose, before moving on to the arms. After Bannister cuts off Oroonoko’s second arm, the slave hero finally dies. At this point, Oroonoko is a literally butchered remnant of his former heroic self.

All-in-all, throughout most of the novel, Behn’s Oroonoko is a much more charismatic, resolved, and even caricaturish, hero than Southerne’s. In the drama, Oroonoko is repeatedly troubled by second-guessing himself. He possesses the classically tragic “fatal flaw” of indecision, as well as the conflict common to tragic Restoration heroes -- the struggle to choose between his love for Imoinda and his desire for honorable retribution against the Governor. At the end, deprived of his love, Southerne’s Oroonoko at long last takes action and revenges himself on the Governor before taking his own life. Indecisive throughout the story, the dramatic hero finally follows through with the decisive action he and the theatergoers both desire. Unfortunately for their own audiences, Antony and Bacon fail to achieve this cathartic vengeance before taking their own lives.
Beyond the addition of the comic plotline, as described earlier, Southerne changed numerous plot-points and dialogue from Behn’s original text. Through these changes, Oroonoko has changed from an idealist with high and noble concepts of love to a real man with flaws and self-doubt. According to A.R. Nichols, by the Restoration period, playgoers were “no longer entranced by the platonic love professed by characters who existed more in rhetoric than in action” (134). Audiences wanted to see a character of emotional strength. To modern audiences, Oroonoko’s self-doubt and indecision would read as passive and weak. But, Restoration audiences would expect to see a hero who suffers for his flaws. While Behn’s Oroonoko is too strong and perfect to suffer -- or at least to outwardly show any sign of inner turmoil and suffering -- Southerne’s stage hero, like his predecessors Antony and Bacon, provides audiences with plentiful opportunities to witness nobly heroic anguish.

Southerne’s Oroonoko, Behn’s Bacon, and Dryden’s Antony are men of passionate love and emotional strength. Though wracked by self-doubt and indecision regarding
physical actions, the heroes remain approachable and more realistically depicted heroes than Behn’s Oroonoko. Earlier heroes might not have struggled with the decision between love and honor, as platonic, distant love would be a weak rival for a hero’s honor. Only with the advent of the Restoration-style drama would a hero feel this kind of love strongly enough for it to affect his actions. Nichols argues that Southerne “domesticated his hero into a man whose first duty is not honor but love … [replacing] the platonic lovemaking of the earlier tragedies with passionate addresses and indicat[ing] strong movements to support those speeches” (134).

Accordingly, not only has Southerne provided his hero with active language and passionate internal and external dialogues, he has also given Oroonoko more to do physically on-stage. Furthermore, Southerne was very particular and exacting in how Oroonoko should be produced and staged. Elmore notes that Oroonoko has more stage directions than any other Southerne play, and that the passionate lovemaking is more explicitly depicted. In Oroonoko, the actors received six separate directions to embrace, while
Southerne’s own *The Fatal Marriage* has no such references (53). Clearly, Southerne wants the passionate love Oroonoko feels for Imoinda to be readily apparent to the play’s audiences, and the playwright understands that actions speak louder than words when it comes to depicting strong emotions on-stage. The heights of Oroonoko’s love must justify the depths of torment and indecision to which he succumbs and both of these extremes must be acted out very specifically.

With further regard to practical staging and technical requirements, Southerne omits Behn’s lengthy descriptions of the Governor’s poisoned injury and eventual recovery, as well as extensive accounts of Oroonoko’s whipping, torture, and slow recovery. Southerne skips all of this, likely for expediency and convenience. Even though “Sir William Davenant’s introduction of movable sets and stage machinery [allowed] the Restoration theater ... to effectively represent torture” (Smith), Southerne opts not to depict the horrific torture involved in Behn’s telling of the tale. A torture scene earlier on would detract from the later death scene at the end of the play.
However, this deletion would not preclude a separate depiction of Oroonoko’s torturous death later -- which Southerne also avoids. As previously mentioned, a prolonged torture at the hands of his enemies would not grant this theatrical Oroonoko the noble self-determined end that this sort of tragedy requires. Antony’s own botched suicide and prolonged death seem to reject this notion of heroic self-determination, but in fact adds to the pathos of Antony and Cleopatra’s love story (when a fatally wounded Antony learns that Cleopatra lives). The Egyptian queen then arranges a dignified, even triumphant, suicide -- determining her own fate to the last. Bacon too, refrains from a death of ignominious defeat, “since there are nobler ways to meet with death” (Behn, 52). He has planned ahead and unstopping the poison hidden in the pommel of his sword, which has “long born a noble remedy for all the ills of life” (53), Bacon meets a dignified and heroic end.

Additionally, to a Restoration audience, scenes of prolonged and gratuitous torture -- such as the death scene in Behn’s Oroonoko -- would be distasteful. George Saintsbury noted that in All for Love, Dryden “omits
whatever in the original story is shocking and repulsive from the romantic point of view" (Adams, 37). Southerne follows Dryden’s lead in eliminating such revolting scenes from Oroonoko’s story. This serves not only the purpose of avoiding depiction of the violent vulgarity of Oroonoko’s torture scene, but also aids in wrapping up the drama more succinctly following the true climax of the tragic plotline — Imoinda’s death and Oroonoko’s capture. Oroonoko’s death is a necessary consequence of his rebellion and by this point in the evening, playgoers are less interested in the hero’s prolonged agony than in their post-theatre dining plans. Accordingly, Southerne wraps things up quickly for Oroonoko.

Whatever changes in plot, characterization, or mood Southerne made in adapting Dryden’s and Behn’s tragic plays within the framework of Behn’s novel seem to have worked for his audiences. In her detailed description of Bendele’s 1999 adaptation of the Oroonoko story, Anne Widmayer describes the popularity of Southerne’s Oroonoko. The play was “hugely successful” “from its first appearance in 1695 through the end of the eighteenth century” (205). She
compares several post-Restoration productions of the Oroonoko story not to Behn’s original novel, but rather to Southerne’s dramatic script. Within the Restoration Period itself, Southerne was widely recognized as the true teller of Oroonoko’s story, and even then it was acknowledged that Southerne’s own fame and literary immortality were likely linked to Oroonoko’s. In Robert Gould’s “On the Death of Mr. Dryden,” Gould lauds not Behn in reference to Oroonoko, but Southerne, saying “Southern [sic], who singing Oroonoko’s Flame / Has made his own a like immortal name” (224).

It is evident that Southerne adapted the Oroonoko character names, basic story-line, and setting from Behn’s book, but modifications were made to accommodate the practical needs of staging the play as well as to meet the wishes of theatergoers. For Southerne’s characterization of a realistically-flawed Restoration hero, he primarily draws not from Behn’s original text, but rather on Marc Antony as depicted in Dryden’s *All for Love*, as well as Nathaniel Bacon portrayed in Behn’s *The Widdow Ranter*. The final result is a hugely successful dramatic piece -- an
excellent representative of classically-inspired, Restoration Drama.
Bibliography


