

“Spectacles of a Mangled King:” Power and the Body in Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko

At a key point in Aphra Behn’s novel Oroonoko, the enslaved prince of the title, having been whipped and tortured in a ghastly manner, asserts to his enemies that he will not consent to die until he has had a complete revenge. “Then you shall see,” he announces, “that Oroonoko scorns to live with the indignity that was put on Caesar” (2210). In distinguishing himself, “Oroonoko,” from the name that has been given to him by the slaveholders, “Caesar,” Oroonoko is acknowledging the commodification of his body, and separating that body from his pure self or soul. In The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry explores the role of pain in the creation of a divide between body and self, as “the person in great pain experiences his own body as the agent of his agony,” leading him/her to an intense experience of his/her self as something separate from the body (47). Oroonoko experiences his body as an enemy to himself not only as a result of the pain that has been inflicted on this body, but also as the result of his realization that his body has become a commodity, the possession of others rather than of himself. This duality eventually leads Oroonoko to a process of self-mutilation by which he reclaims his body, anticipating the torment his masters intend to inflict on him and inflicting this pain on himself as a demonstration of the otherness his body has taken on.

Oroonoko first experiences the transformation of his body into a good shortly after his capture, on the boat to Surinam. “For a prince,” writes Anita Pacheco, “enslavement obviously entails a monstrous loss of face,” and Oroonoko realizes quickly that his honor has been taken from him (6). Oroonoko’s immediate reaction to this loss of dignity is to struggle to free himself, but upon realizing that this is impossible, he resolves to take his own life:

And they had so wisely managed his fetters that he could

not use a hand in his defense, to quit himself of a life that
would by no means endure slavery, nor could he move from
the place where he was tied to any solid part of the ship, against
which he might have beat his head...he resolved himself to
perish for want of food...he laid himself down, and sullenly
resolved upon dying. (2190)

Oroonoko realizes early on that living in slavery will not be an option for him, a royal prince of great dignity and pride, although he himself does not object to a brand of slavery that results from honorable warfare. His enslavement is different, in his mind at least, because it is a punishment of his unsuspecting trust, rather than the result of an agreed upon contract of battle. In this passage Oroonoko also realizes the new value of his body, a body which will soon be bought and sold and which will increase and decrease in value based on its condition. By threatening to exterminate this body by starving it, Oroonoko is able to manipulate his captors into allowing him the freedom to walk about the ship's cabin without fetters, and thus maintains his status among his fellow slaves as a dignified and noble leader. Upon his arrival and subsequent selling into the possession of Mr. Trefry, Oroonoko's nobility is recognized and revered despite his position of subservience. "A violated order thus mysteriously and infallibly reasserts itself," Pacheco observes. "Oroonoko is a slave in name only" unfortunately, for a prince used to a greater freedom, "that, apparently, is degradation enough" (4).

Oroonoko does manage to live quite happily in bondage for a period of time, especially upon being reunited with his bride, and it is not until he begins to contemplate the future of his unborn son that slavery becomes a truly intolerable state for him. Realizing that slavery is a

permanent loss of the possession of one's physical self, and that his son will therefore be born into an endless life of servitude, Oroonoko is plunged into a despair that leads him to revolt against the slaveholders when he is denied his freedom. He is captured almost immediately, and "whipped...in a most deplorable and inhuman manner, rending the very flesh from [his] bones," and afterwards "loaded...all over with irons" and his wounds are rubbed with pepper until he is driven very nearly "raving mad" (2209). Oroonoko then undergoes the process of body and mind division that Scarry describes as occurring in victims of torture:

What the process of torture does is to split the human
being into two, to make emphatic the ever present
but...only latent distinction between a self and a body,
between a "me" and "my body." (48-49)

It is immediately after his recovery from the damage this torture has done to his body that Oroonoko begins to refer to himself as separate from "Caesar," the name he has been given by his masters and by which he has been referred to since his arrival in Surinam. His body becomes an object of loathing to him, rendering him unable to feel a unity between himself and the physical form he occupies, and driving him deeper and deeper into a reckless despair.

Up until the point of Oroonoko's second re-capture by the slaveholders he has fled, self-mutilation and intentional scarification have been mentioned twice. The first is a bizarre afterthought which seems to relate in no way to the immediate subject of the text, in which Behn, the narrator, pauses for a moment to tell her readers about the beautiful scarification on the bodies of Oroonoko and Imoinda. "I had forgot to tell you," she writes, "that those who are nobly born of that country are so delicately cut and rased all over the forepart of the trunk of

their bodies...the works being raised like high point round the edges of the flowers”

(2196). Here the mutilation of the body is an act meant to celebrate and embellish the beauty of the body, namely the body of an individual of nobility and honor. In this form of scarification, the body is an extension of the self, and the wounds inflicted are intended to showcase on the physical form the beauty of the honorable spirit within. Like our modern day tattooing or piercing, this is an almost literal writing of the soul on the body, a process in which the individual is able to “tolerate pain for the purpose of attaining a finished product” (Simpson 4). The “finished product” is a glorification of the earthly vessel that holds a beautiful spirit, a means of bringing together the soul and the body it resides in.

The second mention of self-mutilation, in contrast, focuses almost entirely on the pain of the process of doing harm to one’s own body. Oroonoko, along with Behn and several others, make a visit to a native tribe of Surinam, where they are introduced to the practice by which generals are chosen to lead the tribe in war. Two men are chosen to “stand in competition for the generalship,” and they proceed to demonstrate what they are willing to do for the privilege of leading the army:

When he who is first asked, making no reply, cuts off
his nose, and throws it contemptibly on the ground; and
the other does something to himself that he thinks
surpasses him, and perhaps deprives himself of lips and an
eye; so they slash on till one gives out, and many have died
in this debate. (2204)

This ritual, which Oroonoko notably responds to as “too brutal to be applauded,” is marked by its demonstration of the “passive valor” of the competing men. The men are required to show utter contempt for their own bodies, signifying their lack of attachment to their physical forms and thus their willingness to undergo extraordinary pain and torment for the sake of victory in warfare. In demonstrating such scorn for their bodies, the men in competition are perceived as holding great power, the power to eliminate all attachments to the things of the world, and therefore their pain enables them to become truly perfect warriors with the ability to endure anything for the sake of victory.

The role of pain in the construction of power as defined by Scarry can be summarized as follows: as the pain of the individual whose body is being acted upon increases, the absence of pain in the inflictor becomes more and more present, that is, as the tortured becomes more aware of his pain, the torturer becomes more aware of his lack of pain. The freedom of the torturer from pain becomes his source of power; through the infliction of horrible pain he eliminates the world of the tortured, and thus increases the scope of his own world (Scarry 36). Self-mutilation can therefore be understood as a dual experience: that of both denying the world and reclaiming the body. In a religious context, as Scarry emphasizes, “self-flagellation...[is] a way of so emphasizing the body that the contents of the world are cancelled and the path is clear for the entry of an unworldly, contentless force”(34). In other words, the creation of a pain so immense that all worldly stimuli is cancelled out, one may consider himself more able to make contact with the spiritual world, or the world of pure ideas.

At the other end of the spectrum of power gained through an act of self-mutilation is the concept of claiming the body as one's own by doing violence to it. In her article on self-mutilation in abused women, Janice McLane quotes one self-mutilator's journal in which she writes “When I put

down this pen, who'll get to me first? My [abuser] or me? I'd rather get there first. This belongs to me!"(Kim [1993] 3-4, qtd. in McLane 114). Here, the speaker inflicts pain on her own body in anticipation of the pain another plans to inflict on it, re-possessing her body by doing it harm by her own hand. The two roles of self-mutilation in defining power are interconnected, for in order for this taking back of the body to occur, the individual must first feel a sense of complete detachment from this body, a disregard or even a desire for damage to be done to it.

Oroonoko's acts of violence towards his body at the end of the narrative are expressive of this dual nature of self-mutilation. After killing Imoinda and laying beside her rotting corpse for eight days, Oroonoko is finally discovered by his captors, whom he finds the strength to confront despite having gone without food or water for over a week. "You will find no more Caesars to be whipped, no more find a faith in me," he addresses them. "Feeble as you think me, I have strength yet left to secure me from a second indignity" (2213). This announcement echoes Oroonoko's utterance following his first whipping and torturing in its reference to "Caesar" as something separate, other than Oroonoko himself. After asserting that he is not afraid to die, Oroonoko begins to cut himself apart in a manner very like that of the natives' contest that he previously shunned. He begins by cutting "a piece of flesh from his own throat, and [throwing] it at 'em," and explains to the spectators that he "must make haste" to die by his own hand, lest he "shall fall a victim to the shameful whip" (2213). Here Oroonoko's actions are nearly identical to that of the self-mutilating abuse victim who injures herself to reclaim her body: Oroonoko in a sense wins back his commodified body from his masters by doing the damage to it that he anticipates they plan to do themselves. His actions also mirror that of the religious self-flagellator, in that his violence towards the body that is no longer his possession serves to emphasize the self that he understands can belong to no one but him. In his attempted elimination of the body that his captors wish to

torment, Oroonoko divides himself from this body, making himself spiritually immune to the violence his masters wish to inflict on him.

While Oroonoko fails in his goal of suicide, he is successful in making a clear and final division between his body and his self. In the passivity that he shows while he is being tortured for the second time, Oroonoko demonstrates the extent to which he has given up his attachment to his body. With his self-disembowelment in front of his captors, his body has lost all of the beauty it was once admired for, and has become “so altered that his face was like a death’s head, blacked over, nothing but teeth and eyeholes” (2214). In contrast with the the soul’s communication through the eyes that Behn has emphasized through much of the first half of the novel, Oroonoko’s spirit is now so absent from his body that his eyes are merely dark holes, no longer gateways to his spiritual self. Oroonoko is nursed back to health by the slaveholders, and then taken and tied to the whipping post, where a fire is started at his feet. He asks for a pipe, and does not seem to show any sign of recognition of what is being done to his body, even as he is castrated and his nose, ears, and arms are cut off. Only after his second arm is removed “does his head sink and his pipe drop from his mouth,” in a manner that has suggested to some critics “the stoic fortitude of the martyr” (Pacheco 10). He dies “without a groan or a reproach” even in his eyes, which during his first whipping “pronounced a woe and revenge...that was at once both awful and terrible to behold” (2215, 2209).

The final acts done to Oroonoko’s body serve as a reminder of how objectified this body has become. He is “cut ... in quarters, and sent ... to several of the chief plantations” (2215). The intention is that these pieces of the mangled body will be shown to other slaves, as a warning against revolt. Oroonoko’s body has become a metaphor, no longer a human thing of beauty and dignity but an example to be displayed to others. However, by recognizing the turning of his body into a

thing before its final objectification, Oroonoko has saved himself a certain dignity: he has reclaimed a level of power and nobility by cutting himself off from his body by his own hand.

As the subtitle of Oroonoko, “The Royal Slave,” indicates, the narrative is essentially about a man sold into slavery who is unfit for bondage due to his royal sense of dignity and duty towards himself and his people, a duty that is almost too high at times. Oroonoko’s concept of his own nobility leads to a fluctuating struggle for power that centers around the ownership of his body. As he realizes that his body has been objectified and turned into a commodity, Oroonoko is forced to reclaim his power by turning against his body, acting violently upon it in anticipation of the violence his masters plan to act out upon it. Despite their attempt to reclaim power by reviving Oroonoko’s mangled body, the slaveholders are unsuccessful in tormenting him, as he has already cut himself off completely from his body. Even their attempt to make Oroonoko’s quartered body into an example fails, as another slaveholder refuses to accept his quarter, claiming that “he could govern his Negroes without terrifying and grieving them with frightful spectacles of a mangled king” (2215). In his death, Oroonoko is still a prince, retaining his royalty through his noble, though grotesque, transcendence of his own body.

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