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## Aphra Behn's Tigers

APHRA BEHN'S *OROONOKO, or the Royal Slave* (1688) is a novel about a West African prince abducted into Surinamese slavery. As Janet Todd and many others have noted, the novel demonstrates the professional skill of a woman writer even as it seems sometimes to anticipate in the reader uncertainty about the legitimacy of this same skill. "[Oroonoko's] misfortune was to fall in an obscure world that afforded only a female pen to celebrate his fame," the narrator apologetically notes.<sup>1</sup> The novel also promotes Behn's Tory loyalties. The regal Oroonoko, butchered by commercially minded mediocrities, dies rather like Charles I, in "frightful spectacles of a mangled king" (140). But *Oroonoko* abundantly proves something else. The fate of a fictional protagonist may be intimately and comprehensively fused with the fate of a particular tradition—its conventions, its generic markers, its power of precedent motivating, even dictating the shape of the plot fully as much as any intended or retroactively surmised political aims.

In other words, a story may unfold as the destiny of a tradition as much as of a character. Once Oroonoko leaves Africa, he is re-named Caesar. As this alteration suggests, it is the novel's intense play with the Graeco-Roman heritage that finds exemplary fulfilment on the alien American soil of Surinam. Seventeenth-century slavery's echo of antique practices helps promote such fulfilment. One especially notable vehicle for Behn's classicizing im-

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<sup>1</sup> See Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko, The Rover and Other Works*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Penguin, 1992) 108. Throughout the essay, reference is made to this edition. Todd follows modern orthography, but reproduces faithfully the pronomial equivocation of the seventeenth-century text.

pulse is her imagery of big cats. Close consideration of classical precedents for this imagery may explain an extraordinary grammatical peculiarity in *Oroonoko*. Behn uses mysteriously oscillating, unstable male and female pronouns to describe tigers in a pair of climactic Surinamese hunting scenes. This equivocation offers a royal road to understanding precisely how the literary bequest of antiquity can enrich the reader's understanding of Oroonoko's destiny. Why do both of Aphra Behn's ferocious tigers undergo a change of sex close to the instant of their extinction at Oroonoko's hand? The answer may be that Behn, like any writer, is strongly directed and, indeed, circumscribed—figuratively enslaved—by the horizon of her inherited stock of tropes. The disastrous outcome of Oroonoko's heroic career may predict the failure of epic as a genre in British literature of the eighteenth century.

Angeline Goreau points out in her biography that Behn knew neither Latin nor Greek. The opportunity to acquire these languages marked "the great dividing line between the sexes."<sup>2</sup> Behn's younger contemporary, Sarah Fryge Egerton, contested this inequality of education and optimistically asserted, in "The Emulation,"

We will our Rights in Learning's World maintain,  
Wit's Empire, now, shall know a Female Reign.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of Behn's lack of conversancy with Latin and Greek, *Oroonoko* showcases her versatility in manipulating the topics of ancient literature. A gifted artist will assimilate what is necessary in spite of apparent practical disadvantages. Besides, classical motifs were especially fashionable, and therefore saleable, in the 1680s. Behn was the epitome of a working writer; she responded expertly to such imperatives. A simile modishly indebted to Greece and Rome, involving a big cat, appears in connection with Oroonoko before his displacement to Surinam, where such cats soon make a literal appearance. "It may be easily guessed in what manner the prince resented this indignity," Behn's narrator exclaims, describing Oroonoko's resistance to a slave captain's shipboard ambush,

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<sup>2</sup> Angeline Goreau, *Reconstructing Aphra: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn* (New York: Dial, 1980) 31–32.

<sup>3</sup> "The Emulation," lines 31–32. See Roger Lonsdale, ed., *Eighteenth Century Women Poets* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 32.

which will oblige the African to a life of servitude, terminated in his American exile by abortive rebellion and excruciating dismemberment. Oroonoko "may be best resembled to a lion taken in a toil; so he raged, so he struggled for liberty, but all in vain" (103). Though Oroonoko has the rank of prince, he bears comparison here to the king of beasts. Behn's narrator makes this analogy at just the moment when Oroonoko violently moves from one pole of his identity (hereditary noble status) to the other (servile abasement). The prince incarnates at last the oxymoron of the alternate title that Behn supplies for her novel: *The Royal Slave*. Big cats such as lions have, of course, often stood as figurative proxies for heroes of notable martial valour, particularly in that Graeco-Roman epic tradition to which Behn makes extensive reference throughout *Oroonoko*.

For Aristotle, providing examples in his *Art of Rhetoric*, the archetypal metaphor is, predictably, Homer's: "when the poet says 'and like a lion leapt,' it is a simile, but when 'a lion leapt,' it is a metaphor; for because they are both bold, [Homer] spoke of Achilles by the metaphor of the lion."<sup>4</sup> Oroonoko does not himself pounce on the treacherous slavers: he is pounced upon. Nevertheless, at the moment when the slavers seize him, the prince, like a lion, manifests two traits apposite for a classical hero: rage (think of Achilles' furor) and a hunger for freedom equal in scope to an assumed innate *megalopsyche* or magnanimity. Plutarch recounts that Philip of Macedon dreamed, before the birth of Alexander, that his wife's body was closed with a seal impressed with a lion; Aristander of Telmessus interpreted this dream to mean "that the queen was with child of a boy, who would one day prove as stout and courageous as a lion."<sup>5</sup> Behn's narrator has already attributed Aristotelian "greatness of soul" to Oroonoko (79). His capture and transport across the Atlantic significantly mean the forfeiture of his native name, and its replacement by the classical "Caesar"; he whom Behn's narrator had already described as a black Mars now lives, less allegorically, under a designation from the same thesaurus of antique nonpareils.

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<sup>4</sup> See Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. H.C. Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 1991) 1207a.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, trans. John Dryden (New York: Modern Library, n.d.) 802.

In the context of slavery, such re-baptisms usually obliterate old identities and involve unselfconscious derision on the part of masters. But prince Oroonoko actually lives up, as best he can, given the constraints of his captivity, to the weight of his new name: he rids it of irony. In her poem "Farewell to Celadon," Behn already used "Caesar" as a pseudonym for Charles II, another ruler. The narrator of the novel says, "Mr Trefry gave Oroonoko [the name] of Caesar, which name will live in that country as long as that (scarce more) glorious one of the great Roman, for 'tis most evident, he wanted no part of the personal courage of that Caesar, and acted things as memorable, had they been done in some part of the world replenished with people and historians that might have given him his due" (108). The avenues for glory confronting a slave in the squalid colony of Surinam are few. One way in which Oroonoko may achieve a degree of proportionate renown, despite his reduced circumstances, is hunting the big cats of Surinam. Behn's narrator calls them "tigers."

Venery is proper heroic activity, or in Behn's epic phrasing "memorable." Early in the *Aeneid*, on the shore of North Africa, Aeneas boldly dispatches seven deer, *ingentia ... corpora* ("gigantic specimens"), for his shipwrecked crew (1.192–93). Deer are plausible enough. But do tigers even exist in the New World? Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* uses the same catch-all term to identify big cats in an African environment: "to have fallen into the hands of any of the savages had been as bad as to have fallen into the hands of lions and tigers."<sup>6</sup> Neither Surinam nor the west coast of Africa lie within the historical range of tigers. Even those that once roamed the region of the Caspian Sea have been extirpated since the days of Alexander the Great. In Behn's narrative, however, the coincidence of the term "tiger" in an American milieu with its classical European resonances, like the forcible imposition of the name "Caesar," has critical importance for elucidating the web of allusions and generic markers that make Oroonoko's plight especially comprehensible—while incidentally helping to explain why tigers should change sex when Oroonoko kills them.

Early in her novel, Aphra Behn ensures that her protagonist knows who Caesar, Achilles and Alexander are. Just as Mary Shelley provides Frankenstein's monster with a course of reading, guaran-

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<sup>6</sup> See Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1970) 28.

teeing that the aggrieved giant absorbs the pertinent sorrows of Adam and Werther, so Behn supplies Oroonoko with a European syllabus, apprehended, to be sure, by listening rather than by reading. Behn's narrator observes that "[Oroonoko] knew almost as much as if he had read much: he had heard of, and admired the Romans" (80). Frankenstein's monster can empathize strictly with Adam, having been created along lines analogous to those which animated the original man; comparably, the physiognomy of Oroonoko approximates to the type of Caesar: "His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat" (81).

Before his exile to the sugar colonies of Surinam, where Oroonoko completes the tragic trajectory of his classical fate under the name of Caesar, the prince displays characteristics that place him irresistibly within the tradition of Graeco-Roman history and epic. Like Achilles, he sulks in his tent over a woman, while the army on whose preservation he ought to focus nearly loses a battle. The creation of a female writer, Oroonoko earns more credit by his military reluctance than his literary model, Achilles. When Achilles withdrew from action, the cause was not love but pride of ownership—a dispute with Agamemnon over the body of a handmaiden—whereas Oroonoko's adoration of his beloved Imoinda is as sincere as it is exemplary, manifest in the declaration that, despite the habits of a polygamous culture, "she should be the only woman he would possess while he lived; that no age or wrinkles should incline him to change ... he should have an eternal idea in his mind of the charms she now bore" (83). In his love but also in his death, Oroonoko's behaviour revisits and revises certain tropes of antiquity. The gruesomeness of Oroonoko's demise casts lurid, oblique, but effective light on Aphra Behn's metamorphic tigers' unstable gender identity.

An elaborate sort of funerary baroque, or "good death," appears in the Roman writer Tacitus. That historian's task was to chronicle the immolation and self-immolation of many members of the nobility under the rule of emperors such as Nero and Domitian. Oroonoko's death, as "Caesar," constitutes an exemplary Roman death, though inflected thoroughly in detail by its Surinamese location. For example, Caesar indulges in that archetypally New World manifestation of stoicism, smoking, which, in common with many later heroes, gratifies his last wish and steadies him for his ultimate agony:

[Caesar] had learned to take tobacco; and when he was assured he should die, he desired they would give him a pipe in his mouth, ready lighted, which they did; and the executioner came, and first cut off his members, and threw them in the fire; after that, with an ill-favoured knife, they cut his ears, and his nose, and burned them; he still smoked on, as if nothing had touched him; then they hacked off one of his arms, and still he bore up, and held his pipe; but at the cutting off the other arm, his head sunk, and his pipe dropped; and he gave up the ghost, without a groan, or a reproach. (140)

In one respect, the calm theatrics of this death surpass those attributed to classical heroes. A convention of epic death-scenes dictates that the dying man, though courageous, cannot suppress a reflexive groan. He resigns his vital breath audibly. At the end of the *Aeneid*, for example, the Italian prince Turnus expires with a regretful noise: *ast illi sulvuntur frigore membra / vitaque cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras*, "But a chill loosens his limbs and his life with a groan flees repining among the shades." Caesar's *autarcheia*, his supreme self-control, manages to suppress even this ordinarily automatic, and hoarse, last breath.

Caesar refrains from groaning. He also, almost mockingly, persists in a habit that the lethal Europeans have taught him: smoking. What does smoking signify? In its nonchalance, the persistence in the act of smoking up to the very moment of supersession recalls the end of figures in Tacitus such as Petronius Arbiter, who as he committed suicide laughed, joked, broke coveted heirlooms and composed a catalogue of his oppressor Nero's amatory escapades. Sir Walter Raleigh introduced the practice of smoking from the Virginia colony; he also explored the Venezuelan river Orinoco. The name of this river supplies a virtual homophone of Oroonoko. Thus odd reciprocations between the Old and the New Worlds inflect the way Caesar dies. Coming to the Americas, he forfeits his American-sounding name; after leaving the Old World, he is called after a celebrated European general and dictator. According to Behn's narrator, Surinam's indigenous people elect their own military leaders

in Pyrrhic fashion. Aspiring generals must endure ordeals of self-mutilation:

When any war was raging ... two [native] men were to stand in competition for the generalship.... They are asked, What they dare do to show they are worthy to lead an 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. (124)

Caesar smokes as dedicatedly as any colonial European; and as bravely as any Surinamese commander, he suffers his imposed *sparagmos* or dismemberment. His body-parts, beginning with his genitals, are successively burned in an adjacent fire. Behn enumerates Caesar's corporeal losses, and recounts their incineration in a kind of excruciating *blazon*. While the flames of the fire cremate his body piecemeal, Caesar maintains control over another fire, the fire in his pipe—a kind of counter-fire, concentrated, a self-contained conflagration, the external emblem of an internal sovereignty, male in its protrusion and only to be surrendered at the utmost end of life. The fire in the bowl of the pipe affords a focus for pleasure as the open fire annihilates the man who indulges himself with such stoical hedonism. Caesar has lost physical integrity, but he keeps ignited for as long as possible the integrity of his executive will. This opposition of a bravely cherished individual flame to an eventually victorious, public and inimical pyre conforms to a pattern typical generally of Caesar's career in Surinam. Outward ultimate cancellation, partial subjective success: Aphra Behn's tigers signify much the same as Caesar's pipe in the figural economy of the novel.

To slay a tiger—and Caesar kills two—is traditionally a feat of heroism. In Caesar's case, however, this heroism has deeply equivocal resonance. Hunting of large animals is an obvious exercise in domination. But Caesar, the abject "royal slave," is himself dominated. His conquest of tigers in Surinam implies self-defeat. The cats' destruction only prefigures his own. Aphra Behn's own

situation suggests an intriguing but hardly exhaustive parallel to Caesar's and the tigers': the author of the novel was herself dying, and she would be dead in 1689. Behn's tigers thus resemble those depicted by the woman in Adrienne Rich's poem: "The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid."<sup>7</sup> In one scene, Caesar manages to arrest the preternaturally resilient but already terribly wounded heart of a seemingly invincible tiger. Yet he cannot remedy the injuries damaging his own heart. Many of these injuries derive from the distress it causes Caesar to know that his African beloved Imoinda, pregnant with a child destined for slavery, must share the indignities, limitations and horrors of captivity with him.

In and of themselves, Behn's tigers raise a question. Charlotte Sussman and other careful readers have identified strong romance elements in *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave*. Not least among these characteristics is an inconsistent regard for the realities of an exotic setting. Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* features a Bohemia bounded by fictitious sea-coasts; Aphra Behn's Surinam, which lies on the north-east coast of South America, includes among its fauna the notably inaccurate importation of tigers. The *OED* suggests that the term "tiger" was applied at times to the pumas and cougars of the New World, a disposition that Defoe's loose employment of "tiger" would generally confirm. Aphra Behn's tigers exhibit, beyond their odd designation, an odder (though understated) tendency to change their sex at death.

These tigers have not escaped critical attention any more than they could have evaded the sanguinary virtue of Caesar. Jacqueline Pearson addressed the issue in 1991. Pearson claims that Caesar "demonstrates his male courage by killing tigers—always, apparently, female." She emphasizes how these tigers retain their strength so long as they remain female, becoming "male when powerless and defeated." Pearson continues, "The narrator's Freudian slips with pronouns reveal her culturally-constructed anxiety about female power."<sup>8</sup> But the narrator's assignment of sex is considerably less programmatic than Pearson suggests, and the trope

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<sup>7</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," *A Change of World* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1951) 19.

<sup>8</sup> See Jacqueline Pearson, "Gender and Narrative in the Fiction of Aphra Behn," *The Review of English Studies* 42.166 (1991): 185.



of the tiger must be examined in deeper historical context, particularly in light of Roman literature, for Behn's pronomial manoeuvres to become clear. As an artist, Behn surely merits the assumption that she exercised sufficient technical control to avoid egregious "Freudian slips."

It is worth explicitly posing the question, "Why *are* there tigers in Behn's version of Surinam?" The tale of *Oroonoko* begins with a circumstantial—and credible—inventory of New World creatures. Behn's narrator mentions, for example, "Marmosets, a sort of monkey as big as a rat or weasel, but of a marvelous and delicate shape, and has face and hands like an human creature, and cousheries, a little beast in the form and fashion of a lion, as big as a kitten, but so exactly made in all parts like that noble beast, that it is it in miniature" (75). The lion of epic appears in Surinam diminished, unlike the tiger. Behn's narrator, concerned to authenticate some claims about "prodigious snakes" attaining "three-score yards in length," refers her reader to His Majesty's Antiquaries, the natural history museum in Gresham College, catalogued by Nehemiah Grew in 1681. Despite evident concern for scientific veridicality, the narrator hesitates not at all in calling Caesar's prey "tigers."

As linguistic entities, they firmly retain the identity of the big cats that so memorably animate the testimonies of antiquity, such as Pliny the Elder's. This persistence of the tigers' classical identity resonates tellingly with Oroonoko's or Caesar's necessary adjustments in selfhood. The degradation of the slave name permits Caesar to confront the tigers of epic tradition under an honorific drawn from the same classical source. As Caesar, hunter of tigers, he can realize more directly his Graeco-Roman fate. What redoubles the strangeness of Behn's narrative movement from the Old to the New World is that the princely name Oroonoko actually sounds native to the Americas. Tricked into slavery, the African prince loses his literally African-American name, and acquires an emphatically antique title, Caesar. In the New World, this classical hero attacks tigers, emblematic beasts of the Old World, familiar from the poetry of Vergil, Horace and Ovid. Considerable indigeneity is erased in both the royal slave and the prey that he alone has the audacity to kill.

Apart from their name, which supplies strong but not conclusive evidence, how are Aphra Behn's tigers otherwise marked as irrefutably classical in character? Pliny the Elder describes the habits of the tiger and recounts the strategies of its hunters; his description tallies closely with what Behn's novel relates. In Book 8 (section 66) of his *Naturalis Historia*, Pliny writes:

Tigrim Hyrcani et Indi ferunt, animal velocitatis tremendae, et maxime cognitae dum capitur totus eius fetus, qui semper numerosus est ... ubi vacuum cubile reperit feta (maribus enim subolis cura non est) fertur praecipue odore vestigans. Raptor adpropinquante fremitu abicit unum ex catulis. Tollit illa morsu et pondere etiam ocior acta remeat iterumque consequitur, ac subinde donec in navem regresso irrita feritas saevit in litore.

[The Caspian Sea country and India produce the tiger, a beast of terrifying speed—speed experienced to the full when the tiger's litter is captured, a litter always numerous.... Once the breeding tigress discovers her empty nest (for the males do not care for the young), she rushes out, hot on the scent. Hearing her roar near him, the thief tosses away one of the cubs. She takes it up in her jaws and, made even faster by this ballast, she returns to the chase, the thief tossing away one cub after another until, he being embarked back on his ship, the tigress's vain ferocity rages along the shore.]<sup>9</sup>

Motherhood is the *Leitmotiv* of this natural history entry. The reliance of the tiger hunt on the existence of the tiger's litter guarantees this link. Linguistically, maternity is present even in Pliny's use of the verb *fero*, meaning "to bear" as well as "to produce." The motherlands Hyrcania and India "bear" the tiger as the tigress her cubs. The aspect of the animal's behaviour that fascinates Pliny most is its conduct after hunters have abducted its litter. Pliny's

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<sup>9</sup> My translation.

tiger emphatically belongs to the female sex: the archetypal tiger is a "she," and a reproductive "she" at that.

How do these Plinian ethological observations match Caesar's encounters with tigers on Surinamese soil? Just before she recalls these hunting expeditions, Behn's narrator limns a true *locus amoenus*, a pleasant place complete with white marble, Rome's most characteristic mineral, featuring a positively Mediterranean bower of orange and lemon trees: "sure the whole globe of the world cannot show so delightful a place as this grove was: not all the gardens of boasted Italy can produce a shade to outvie this, which Nature had joined with Art to render so exceeding fine; and 'tis a marvel to see how such vast trees, as big as English oaks, could take footing on so solid a rock, and in so little earth, as covered that rock" (117). This nice conjunction of fruitfulness with lapidary solidity may suggest Caesar's own talent for turning his bad Surinamese circumstances into the maximum of fertility and sovereignty achievable by someone still technically a slave. Significantly, Caesar and his beloved Imoinda have conceived a child.

The Graeco-Roman *locus amoenus*, a natural garden and acropolis, is celebrated just before Behn's narrator addresses herself to the "sport" of capturing tiger cubs in their dens. This is precisely the sport about which Pliny the Elder had so long ago written. Caesar alone excels at it. Recalling how she tagged along on these hunts, the narrator remembers, "Oftentimes we have been in great danger ... when surprised by the dams." Strange to say, the word "dam," usually applied to a mother quadruped (by John Dryden, for example), is indifferently male and female in Behn's usage. "Going off," she writes, "we encountered the dam, bearing a buttock of a cow, which he had torn off with his mighty paw." The dam is masculine. On this occasion, Caesar has been hunting in the company of one Mr. Martin, a free European and a master of slaves. Caesar grabs Mr. Martin's sword and asks the disarmed man "to stand aside, or follow the ladies." Under stress of danger, Caesar successfully arrogates to himself from one of his oppressors the hero's prerogative of a sword.

This act of presumption and bravery brings out, perhaps, a latent meaning of "dam." "Dam" ordinarily betokens a mother quadruped. But the word can also be a synonym of the Spanish honorific "Don," which is in turn a contraction of the Latin for "master," *dominus*. Caesar takes on two emblems of mastery simultaneously: the enraged male tiger and the categorically exalted Englishman,

whom the advice to “follow the ladies” has feminized. Yet this reading does not quite resolve the real difficulties of Behn’s text. The narrator tells us that Caesar then “met this monstrous beast ... and fixing his awful stern eyes full upon those of the beast ... ran his sword quite through his breast, down to his very heart, home to the hilt of the sword; the dying beast stretched forth her paw, and going to grasp his thigh, surprised with death in that very moment, did him no other harm than fixing her long nails in his flesh very deep” (117).

The pronomial insecurity of this passage is notable. Caesar’s conquest of the tiger reads also as an act of suicide: “He ran his sword quite through his breast, down to his very heart.” In the absence of clear antecedents for pronouns, this phrasing sounds like the action of a Roman such as Mark Antony falling on his sword as much as the deed of a strong hunter singlehandedly dispatching a trophy animal. The epithet attaching to the tiger is “monstrous.” Caesar shares monstrosity with his prey. After all, he defies and surpasses the norms by which the colonial community normally limits a slave. Moreover, when Caesar has killed Imoinda, the narrator’s remarks tellingly link the grief-stricken African to this tiger: “he tore, he raved, he roared like some monster of the wood.... A thousand times he turned the fatal knife that did the deed toward his own heart” (136).

The spectre of suicide in the destruction of this big cat needs to be explained. Somehow, Caesar kills himself in killing the tiger. If Caesar generally comports himself after the pattern of a Graeco-Roman hero, then he may, in this passage, commit the terrible error of slaying the material for the epic simile, that is to say, the mighty tiger, that ought to have lived to magnify his exploits indefinitely, in the most flattering analogy. In other words, to use the language propounded by I. A. Richards in 1936, the tenor of the simile (Caesar) obliterates his own potential vehicle (the tiger). The death of the animal emblem traditionally incorporated into, and enlarging, a hero’s epic simile implies that Caesar’s energy will destroy itself. It will consume itself; it will burn itself out. In killing the tiger, Caesar has extirpated his own means of epic aggrandizement. A successful epic hero does hunt animals; this undertaking redounds to his credit. But such a pastime is ordinarily adjunct to civic and military achievement (Aeneas slays deer to feed his crew). Behn’s narrator already unselfconsciously compared Caesar to a great cat, “a lion taken in a toil.”

A real epic simile will illuminate what Caesar's plight is. In Book 12 of the *Iliad*, Homer (in Alexander Pope's translation) amplifies Sarpedon's battle-fury:

In Arms he shines, conspicuous from afar,  
And bears aloft his ample Shield in Air;  
Within whose Orb the thick Bull-hides were roll'd,  
Pond'rous with Brass, and bound with ductile Gold:  
And while two pointed Javelins arm his Hands,  
Majestick moves along, and leads his *Lycian* Bands.  
So press'd with Hunger from the Mountain's Brow  
Descends a Lion on the Flocks below,  
So stalks the lordly Savage o'er the Plain,  
In sullen Majesty, and stern Disdain:  
In vain loud Mastives bay him from afar,  
And Shepherds gaul him with an iron War;  
Regardless, furious, he pursues his way:  
He foams, he roars, he rends the panting Prey.  
Resolv'd alike, divine *Sarpedon* glows,  
With grievous Rage that drives him on his Foes.  
He views the Tow'rs, and meditates their Fall,  
To sure Destruction dooms th'aspiring Wall.<sup>10</sup>

Homer's simile leaves room for Sarpedon's upcoming exploits on the field of battle, but it foreshadows the warrior's demise, despite the pleas of Zeus, four books later in the epic: the doomed Sarpedon is laden with the sinister epithets "regardless" and "furious." In Caesar's case, the death of the tiger that should be a basis for his own allegorical magnification forecloses on any further heroic accomplishments. Caesar ought to be *like* a tiger. Instead his abilities falter and stop at the mere capacity to slaughter tigers. This feat makes a poor substitute for the full expression of martial and monarchical glory.

Other oddities in the account of the tiger's death draw attention. At the moment when the sword enters and slays the tiger, its sexual identity changes; the beast passes abruptly from "he" to "she." The Latin for "sheath" is *vagina*. In the technical term now

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<sup>10</sup> See *Iliad* 8.351–68 in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, vol. 8, ed. Maynard Mack (London: Methuen, 1967).

current among theorists of gender, the tiger has been invaginated, that is to say, symbolically furnished with the anatomical mark of femininity, by Caesar's sword (once the possession of Mr. Martin). The tiger's switch of sex does not disable it. Like the boar that hooked a tusk into Odysseus' thigh (or into Adonis'), the tiger also manages retaliatively to invaginate Caesar, wounding him near the groin, the site of potency. The conqueror's masculinity is compromised even in the act that should prove its efficacy.

Immediately afterward in Behn's narrative comes a still more awesome feat of tiger killing. The quarry has already been the object of many hunters' attacks: "abundance of people assailed this beast, some affirming they had shot her with several bullets quite through the body, at several times; and some swearing they shot her through the very heart, and they believed she was a devil rather than a mortal thing. Caesar had often said he had a mind to encounter this monster, and spoke with several gentlemen who had attempted her." The vocabulary of monstrosity recurs. But this time, the tiger is not just female: Behn's narrator sexualizes the animal as a creature whom "several gentlemen ... had attempted." But, unlike Caesar's first victim, this tiger begins its existence as a female animal, transforming itself (or being transformed) to a male. Knowing the Achilles-like indomitability of the tiger, Caesar rationally considers the kind and number of places in which she has previously received shot. He plans his own attack in light of his knowledge of the animal's tried zones of invulnerability.

Caesar discovers this tough cat possessively taking "fast hold" of a "new ravished sheep." Her possessiveness, not without erotic connotation, foreshadows the jealousy that Caesar himself displays when, hunted down after a failed slave revolt, he refuses to surrender his beloved Imoinda. Rather than yielding her and their unborn child, he decapitates Imoinda—another image of dismemberment in a story strewn with such. Caesar stills the life in her belly with the same blow: "The lovely, young and adored victim lays herself down before the sacrificer, while he, with ... a heart breaking within, gave her the fatal stroke, first cutting her throat, and then severing her yet smiling face from that delicate body.... A thousand times he turned the fatal knife that did the deed, toward his own heart" (136). Caesar's murder is the annihilation of his own posterity, a kind of projective suicide. Thus his death and Imoinda's are, like both of the tigers', implicated in family affection; each tiger must be provoked by the loss of its young. When

Caesar so self-destructively defends Imoinda and his unborn child, his behaviour parallels that of the big cats he has slain.

In fact, Caesar's pair of tigers can be construed as representations of the halves into which his own life has fallen. In African Coramantien, Oroonoko (as he then was) enjoyed the prerogatives and carried the burdens of a prince in his native land. The first tiger is male: it is only feminized in its last gasp. The second tiger aptly embodies Caesar's Surinamese sojourn. Enslaved, Caesar has been driven to keep the company of women (such as Behn's narrator, who occasionally voices her own diffidence, however ironically, about her status as an authority). Caesar recoups his masculinity in the courage of his death.

The account of Caesar's fight with the female tiger may provide clues for what it means, in Aphra Behn's story, to be "feminized":

Hiding his person behind certain herbage that grew high and thick, he took so good aim, that, as he intended, he shot her just into the eye ... [I]t stuck in her brain, and made her caper ... [B]eing seconded by another arrow, he fell dead upon the prey. Caesar cut him open with a knife, to see where those wounds were that had been reported to him, and why she did not die of them ... [W]hen the heart of this courageous animal was taken out, there were seven bullets of lead in it, and the wounds seamed up with great scars ... for it was long since they were shot: this heart the conqueror brought up to us ... which gave Caesar occasion of many fine discourses of accidents in war. (119)

The last statement explicitly conflates venatorial and military spheres; for a moment, Caesar sounds like Othello. In any case, killing a tiger has here a metaphoric link with warrior virtue. But the troubling heart imagery of this passage appears elsewhere, more figuratively, in association with Imoinda. When the holdfast king of Coramantien engages Imoinda in caresses, the jealous Oroonoko feels "a new wound in the heart" (88). Later, pregnant Imoinda's "griefs were so many darts in the great heart of Caesar" (135). Caesar's heart is the organ of both courage and affection; tortured, he feels he must "struggle with love for the victory of his heart,

which took part with his charming Imoinda there" (135). Caesar's heart bears wounds as grave as the tiger's. And to this degree Caesar is fused with his female lover, since all his cardiac injuries derive from his inextricable attachment to Imoinda. If a pregnant woman bears a male foetus, then she is physiologically bisexual for the duration of her pregnancy: more figuratively, Caesar is bisexual because he bears so close to his heart concern for a woman and her unborn child. The last tiger that Caesar kills mutates from female to male in the course of its death-spasm; when Caesar has at last slain the willing Imoinda, the debilitating familial care that he has about the fate of his lover and his posterity has reached a decisive resolution. To be "feminized," in such a context, means to harbour profound feeling for one's family, just like a tiger.

Caesar and Imoinda's child, still internal, still in the womb, amounts to a living wound in the heart. Unless Caesar can achieve the liberation of his family, his posterity will be slaves. Tolerance for servitude is incompatible with epic heroism. But Caesar's devotion to Imoinda has something in common with antique genres other than epic. His romantic condition recalls Roman love-elegy, even as epic reminiscences affect other aspects of Behn's novel. The extant work of Sextus Propertius begins with the following program poem:

Cynthia prima suis miserum me cepit ocellis,  
 Contactum nullis ante cupidinibus.  
 Tum mihi constantis deiecit lumina fastus  
 Et caput impositis pressit Amor pedibus.

Cynthia first took me captive with her eyes—  
 Unhappy me!—untouched before by desire.  
 Then Love cast down my gaze's inflexible disdain  
 Tramping my head down under his feet.

In her "To My Lady Morland at Tunbridge," Behn imitates this sort of convention, exclaiming "How many slaves your conquering eyes had won." The poignancy of Caesar's circumstances emerges in part from the confluence of such language (the metaphoric *servitudo amoris*, subjection to Amor) with the grim fact of real slavery. A Roman poet's inamorata often goes under the honorific of *domina*, that is to say, "female master" or "mistress." In his adoration of Imoinda, Caesar is her figurative slave. He also acts in a somewhat



servile role vis-à-vis the female narrator of Behn's story, engaging in petty gallantries. In different ways, Caesar is subject to (or subject of) at least two women, both of whom admire him. These literal and metaphoric slaveries subsist within a narrative that recalls epic. The amatory or romance element recalls one epic, specifically.

Vergil's *Aeneid* offers a blend of love-elegy with martial heroism. Like the seven-times-shot tigress and like the magnanimous royal slave Caesar, Dido in loving the faithless Aeneas endures a terrible wound in the vicinity of her heart. Oddly, Dido even accuses Aeneas of having been nursed by Hyrcanian tigers. In John Dryden's translation, Vergil renders Dido's suffering thus (4.1–6):

But anxious Cares already seiz'd the Queen:  
She fed within her Veins a Flame unseen:  
The Heroe's Valour, Acts and Birth inspire  
Her Soul with Love, and fann the secret Fire.  
His Words, his Looks imprinted in her Heart,  
Improve the Passion, and increase the Smart.

And later (4.93–100):

Sick with Desire, and seeking him she loves,  
From Street to Street, the raving Dido roves.  
So when the watchful Shepherd, from the Blind,  
Wounds with a random Shaft the careless Hind;  
Distracted from her pain she flies the Woods,  
Bounds o'er the Lawn, and seeks the silent Floods;  
With fruitless Care; for still the fatal Dart  
Sticks in her Side; and ranckles in her Heart.

As a simultaneously enslaved and love-struck hero, Caesar forms an amalgam constituted half of Aeneas, half of Dido. He oscillates between these roles just as the Surinamese tigers under stress of death swivel from one sex to the other. Maybe Caesar's extinction by piecemeal burning literalizes the Roman and Restoration convention of love as a "flame." Vergil tells his reader that Dido "burned" with love; and she prepares a pyre before, with masculine fortitude, she falls on a sword. What has gradually destroyed Caesar, this whole system of imagery implies, with its tigers, cubs, wounded hearts, swords, double servitude and unborn children—what has

destroyed Caesar is his vulnerability to the passion of love and to the depth of family feeling.

When Caesar kills his last tiger, the prodigious tiger whose heart has been seven times perforated by bullets, he does not succeed by attacking the heart itself, that seat of courage and the affections, that Aristotelian organ of the hero's proper virtue, *megalopsyche*. Instead, Caesar shoots the tiger through the eye. This aperture forms a notorious homophone with the personal pronoun "I." The pun is cheap. But pronouns have an unusual importance in *Oroonoko*, especially in the Surinamese hunting scenes. According to Behn's logic, Caesar should shoot the tiger through the eye, because he and the tiger are parallel beings—or should be parallel, mutually explicative, like the tenor and vehicle of an epic simile. Instead of maintaining their parallel status, that status collapses; hero and tiger become one, an identical and self-vanquished thing. Caesar's willingness to cancel his identity, his "I," rather than to perpetuate it within the system of slavery, is graphically realized in the slaughter of this almost insuperable beast. Meanwhile, the instability of the tigers' sex reflects Behn's keen but hardly doctrinaire awareness that the markers, not to say the possessors, of dominance alter according to local and transient pressure. Such nuance is implicitly a critique, however limited, of the whole notion of anyone's invariant status as "master."

The insistent classicizing that inflects Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave* may seem to undercut its admirable representation of an intelligent, resourceful and attractive African protagonist, by submerging his contemporary identity in that of half-remembered epic personnel. Moreover, Caesar's epic strivings miscarry, as though prophetically, predicting (it may be) the transformation of epic in the eighteenth century to mock epic.

But the institution of slavery itself may have motivated the astonishing vehemence with which Rome and, to a lesser extent, Greece, recrudescence in Behn's novel. By abducting Africans and transposing them to the Americas, and by perpetuating, albeit with a new and ugly racial emphasis, the antique practice of slavery, the European colonists inevitably brought the topics and conventions of antiquity to bear on their activity in the New World.

An argument that Aphra Behn emerges as somewhat reformist in *Oroonoko* could derive its force from her programmatic invocation of antiquity. After all, Roman slavery was an institution that assimilated its workforce not so much on the basis of skin-colour

as of mere opportunity. Pirates briefly enslaved the young Julius Caesar himself. In this disposition, Rome stood at variance with the British (and later, the Dutch) order established in Surinam. A more provocative argument would assert that what is centrally at issue in *Oroonoko* is the value of classical allusion in the literary market—or the ways in which classical allusion can abduct a story and transport it, like Behn's hero, to shores all the uncannier for being, by reputation at least, overfamiliar.



The Atlantic Cultural Space  
New Directions in  
Heritage and the Arts

Espace culturel Atlantique  
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le patrimoine et les arts

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