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Seven Labors of Her Heart: Imoinda as Epic Heroine

“Through the centuries the tiger has been used as a symbol of man’s deepest fears, desires, and aspirations. It is universally feared as a powerful predator and man-eater, yet admired for its beauty, courage, and strength” (Sunquist 344).

“Thus died this great man, worthy of a better fate, and a more sublime wit than mine to write his praise: Yet, I hope, the reputation of my pen is considerable enough to make his glorious name to survive to all ages, with that of the brave, the beautiful, and the constant Imoinda” – Behn

Beauty, courage, and strength. Bravery, beauty, and constancy. Looking at these two quotes in conjunction with one another, one cannot but help to see the parallel between the choice vocabulary to express the most admirable qualities of majestic big cats and the majestic heroine of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*. Imoinda, the epic lover of Behn’s main character, is not readily read as a character with much agency and subjectivity. Hers is all too often a characterization of “voicelessness” and passiveness, yet with some close attention to finding the bravery within Imoinda, I would argue that she gets the last word of this novel because she embodies and endures the epic characteristics and heartaches of the title hero; but, by virtue of her physicality, is relegated to inhabit the more secondary and supporting role. Imoinda and her relationship to the tigers and other natural landscape of *Oroonoko* are portals to finding early modern examples of admirable virtue within the context of a black female figure. In “Travelling with *Imoinda*: Art, Authorship, and Critique,” Joan Anim-Addo discusses her creative and artistic labor of reconfiguring the story of Imoinda into an opera. “The question of personhood is pertinent also to Behn’s *Oroonoko* in which Imoinda is figured problematically, as silent throughout the text. At the same time, her silence raises serious questions about her ability to ‘Reason.’ Thus, crucial to my task was the important matter of the translation of Imoinda into a speaking, reasoning subject” (572). Imoinda’s story, the one that is told through a relative passivity and silence, is the story of a heart broken time and again, only to heal with scars around the attempted shots, and to

eventually die at the hand of her beloved. Elevating her character by giving her a literal voice, Anim-Addo provides a place for others to also voice Imoinda, in much the same way that David Dabydeen gives a voice to the drowning enslaved body of J.M.W. Turner's *The Slave Ship*. I want to voice seven of the labors that Imoinda suffered into the physical bullets of that tiger's heart and to voice her body as linked with the physical land of Coramantien and Suriname.

Reading *Oroonoko*, I immediately felt drawn to the idea of the two "tigers" scenes as metaphoric interpretations of Imoinda and Oroonoko. That the title hero hunts and kills both of the tigers in these episodes creates an opening to wonder if Behn supplied these scenes as a means of foreshadowing the fates of Oroonoko and Imoinda. In his article, "Asia Out of Place: The Aesthetics of Incorruptibility in Behn's *Oroonoko*," Chi-ming Yang seeks to excavate the Asian influences and aspects of *Oroonoko*. Yang points out that tigers are not indigenous to Suriname and gives brief overview of the tigers' existence in the novella as "a proxy figure for Oroonoko and Imoinda" (247). The article, "Frightful Spectacles of a Mangled King': Aphra Behn's 'Oroonoko' and Narration through Theater" by Marta Figlerowicz offers readers an understanding of the second tiger that Oroonoko kills as a foreshadowing of his own death. "When, on rare occasions, our perspective on Oroonoko is narrowed down to his direct interactions with the narrator, his actions take on an allegorical meaning, laden with the narrator's knowledge of his future. This allows her to read into whatever he does foreshadowings of his fate; most evidently, the pierced, scarred heart of the tiger he kills becomes a prophecy of his painful death" (329). Thus, we see the heart of the tiger becoming an important object wherewith to hinge the metaphor of Oroonoko as a tiger upon.

Perhaps the most extensive handling of the tiger as proxy is in the succinctly named, "Aphra Behn's Tigers." Here, Eric Miller sets up his article's argument, "Big cats such as lions... often stood as figurative proxies for heroes of notable martial valour, particularly in that Graeco-Roman epic tradition" (49). Miller then goes on to explain the importance of big cats, specifically tigers and lions in this epic tradition and connects Oroonoko to the qualities of Greco-Roman heroes, which he says is the tradition for which Behn is basing her treatment of Oroonoko as an epic hero. What Miller makes of his big cat comparisons and antiquity is directly tied to the switching of feminine and masculine pronouns in the narrator's recounting of the tiger hunts.

Behn uses mysteriously oscillating, unstable male and female pronouns to describe tigers in a pair of climatic Surinamese hunting scenes... 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. (48)

Miller makes a valid argument for the purposeful inclusion of heart imagery throughout the novel to set up the second tiger's heart representing the heartaches of Oroonoko, "When the holdfast king of Coramantien engages Imoinda in caresses, the jealous Oroonoko feels 'a new wound in the heart...' Later, pregnant Imoinda's 'griefs were so many darts in the great heart of Caesar...' Caesar's heart is the organ of both courage and affection; tortured" (61). Yet, he makes no mention of the wounds to Imoinda's heart, which is not all too surprising as the narrator rarely gives the readers a glimpse into the inner turmoil or psychological workings of Imoinda. By inserting Imoinda into the conversation on tigers as metaphors and proxies, the vacillation of the pronouns within the context of describing the tiger scenes is perhaps better illuminated. Perhaps, Behn is conflating the feminine and masculine in much the same way that the categorically feminine and masculine traits of Imoinda and Oroonoko are conflated in their dealings with the trials of this world. Bravery and resiliency are traits generally reserved for male and masculine identities, thus the bravery of a heart that has been resilient enough to survive multiple attempts on its life, seems more befitting to the epic hero.

I would like to extend the arguments of the aforementioned authors who focus on Oroonoko's relationship to the tigers to more clearly include Imoinda. While this type of extension may seem a rather obvious continuation, I further add to the conversation by initiating an unlikely switching of linear order to see Imoinda as most represented in the second tiger that Oroonoko slays. Hers is the tiger scene described with more ferocity and vivid imagery. The second tiger's heart was removed and shown to have been shot seven times before she eventually succumbed to Oroonoko's hand. Behn describes the tiger's heart in some detail,

Caesar cut her open with a knife, to see where those wounds were that had been reported to him, and why she did not die of 'em. But I shall now relate a thing that, possibly, will find no credit

among men; because 'tis a notion commonly receiv'd with us, That nothing can receive a wound in the heart and live: But when the heart of this courageous animal was taken out, there were seven bullets of lead in it, the wound seam'd up with great scars, and she liv'd with the bullets a great while, for it was long since they were shot. (198).

I contend that the seven bullets represent seven trials and labors that Imoinda suffers in order to develop a resilience in her heart and body to withstand the onslaught of unimaginable horror that being twice enslaved has brought upon her being and body. There is room to view Imoinda, while not an epic hero in the Greco-Roman tradition and within her muted representation, as the more heroic character.

Imoinda faces wounds to her heart from the beginning of this novella. She is of a royal family and tragically loses her father, as he gives his life to save Oroonoko. This loss would be the first bullet, as her positionality within the context of these patriarchal worlds becomes diminished and subjected to great precariousness because of this loss. This tragedy of losing her father is countered and seemingly seamed up when Oroonoko vows to take her as his wife. Yet, the second bullet comes just as soon as the first wound possibly healed, when the King of Coramantien, the 100 year old grand-father to Oroonoko, insists that Imoinda be brought into his harem. "He was therefore no sooner got to his apartment, but he sent the royal veil to Imoinda; that is, the ceremony of invitation: He sends the lady he has a mind to honour with his bed, a veil, with which she is cover'd, and secur'd for the king's use" (158). Ever constant, Imoinda abides by this royal command and finds herself among the court, but she is spared the dreadful consummation because the King proves too impotent for the task. Yet, Oroonoko suffers conflicted feelings about reclaiming her.

Imoinda is as irrecoverably lost to me, as if she were snatch'd by the cold arms of death: Oh! she is never to be retriev'd. If I wou'd wait tedious years, till fate shou'd bow the old king to his grave, even that wou'd not leave me Imoinda free; but still that custom that makes it so vile a crime for a son to marry his father's wives or mistresses, wou'd hinder my happiness; unless I wou'd either ignobly set an ill precedent to my successors, or abandon my country, and fly with her to some unknown world who never heard our story. (160)

Nevertheless, he conceives of a plan to steal a night with her and we see Imoinda's fate seemingly turning back towards the better. The two share a night of consummating their marriage, which had taken place before the King's commandment, when her lover is found out by the royal guards and decides to flee without her (a decision he later laments). Now the third bullet comes when Imoinda is forced to lie to the King about her night with Oroonoko. "Unknown to her, he had broke into her apartment, and ravished her. She spoke this much against her conscience; but to save her own life, 'twas absolutely necessary she should feign this falsity. She knew it could not injure the prince, he being fled to an army that would stand by him, against any injuries that should assault him" (171). The King decides to give Imoinda a punishment worse than death and sells her into the Atlantic slave trade whereby she is taken to a land, unknown. "He ought to have had so much value and consideration for a maid of her quality, as to have nobly put her to death, and not to have sold her like a common slave" (173). As the third bullet is hardly healed, the fresh torment of the fourth befalls Imoinda, as we can scarcely imagine her to have found any solace or healing whilst undergoing the Middle Passage as a prisoner and being sold on an auction block. Yet, the readers well versed in the tropes of the epic tradition are aware that Oroonoko is fated to suffer the same Middle Passage, to the same country, and a reunion is inevitable between these two favored lovers.

Thus, upon their reunion, whence we learn that Imoinda's beauty and virtue have seemingly spared her the lascivious sexual advances of her enslaver, Trefry. The marriage of Imoinda and Oroonoko again presents a false sense of hope to her already worn heart, since Oroonoko is still under the guise that he will be able to secure freedom for them. Again and again he is put off by the lies of the white invaders and his frustrations with this process grow, which can only logically extend to Imoinda, as her hopes for freedom and liberty have been longed for longer than Oroonoko's.

This new accident made him more impatient of liberty, and he was every day treating with Trefry for his and Clemene's liberty, and offer'd either gold, or a vast quantity of slaves, which should be paid before they let him go, provided he could have any security that he should go when his ransom was paid. They fed him from day to day with promises, and delay'd him till the Lord-Governour should come; so that he began to suspect them of falsehood, and that they would delay him till the

time of his wife's delivery and make a slave of that too: for all the breed is theirs to whom the parents belong. This thought made him very uneasy, and his sullenness gave them some jealousies of him. (191-192)

The “accident” of pregnancy shows that Imoinda and Oroonoko had no intention of bringing their children into the new world of Suriname. Generally, the news of an expected child between two souls so inextricably in love, even though it be an accident, would be seen as a hopeful pronouncement; however, for Imoinda and Oroonoko this news brings trembles of fear since still legally enslaved, their child would “belong” to the slavers and have a mark of slavery from his very birth. I would say that this pregnancy is the sixth bullet to Imoinda.

The seventh bullet is the failed slave rebellion. Again, the fated pair are urged to escape the chains of bondage by securing for themselves what the white invaders and enslavers had repeatedly promised but never intended to do. Imoinda is ever at the ready during the rebellion and her heart does not waver even when the blows of the enemy reign so closely to them. Imoinda, in an act that is scarcely reported in the critical scholarship on her personhood, takes up arms against the slavers and delivers the Governor what would be a fatal blow, had an indigenous woman not sucked the venom of her arrow from his arm. “That by degrees the slaves abandon'd Caesar, and left him only Tuscan and his heroick Imoinda, who grown big as she was, did nevertheless press near her lord, having a bow and a quiver full of poisoned arrows, which she managed with such dexterity, that she wounded several, and shot the governour into the shoulder; of which wound he had like to have died, but that an Indian woman, his mistress, sucked the wound, and cleans'd it from the venom” (210-211). That this Governor, a horrendous incarnation of human frailty, is fated to live through the help of other enslaved and indentured people, while the noble of character are struggling to regain their humanity, fighting for their lives, and consistently losing the battles of perseverance, erases any doubt for Imoinda of her child being born into freedom. Freedom and liberty are precarious. Lines drawn by men who wield power and who are inclined to with a whim of their fancy fetter any people who they deem unfit to rule their own souls. She has seen the ravages of life in this peculiar world and in what seems to be a strangely calm desperation takes the only recourse that she thinks will fit into the nobility of her bravery, beauty, and constancy by asking Oroonoko to take her life. For Imoinda, the only *deus ex machina* of her story reunion with

Oroonoko, yet each time they unite, grueling circumstances arise to complicate beyond measure their lives. She is the tiger that fights ferociously until the very end. She is the beast that has raged against the human encroachment on her land, whereby the tiger's land becomes Imoinda's body.

As any treatment of Imoinda without at least a mention on her body would be grossly irresponsible, I will now give a brief analysis of what also seems to be overlooked in much of the scholarship surrounding her character. Behn's narrator, along with everyone else in the novella, is taken by Imoinda's physical beauty. I have hitherto laid my foundation for view Imoinda as a metaphor with the tigers of this novella, thus connecting her with the Asian arena of the period. Further indication that Imoinda can be read as being a connecting thread of Indian and Atlantic ocean-ways comes through in one of the narrator's description of Imoinda's body.

I had forgot to tell you, that those who are nobly born of that country, are so delicately cut and raised all over the fore-part of the trunk of their bodies that it looks as if it were japan'd, the works being raised like high point round the edges of the flowers. Some are only carved with a little flower, or bird, at the sides of the temples, as was Caesar; and those who are so carved over the body, resemble our antient Picts that are figur'd in the chronicles, but these carvings are more delicate. (Behn 191)

While Imoinda and the people of Coramantien would not describe the carvings of her body as being "japan'd," the idea of placing black lacquer with intricate designs onto Imoinda's body further showcases how the Asian influence on the English narrator is being transferred to the black Coramantien body. The differences are likened to what the English have vocabulary for, rudimentary as it may be. Moving on to the last scene of Imoinda's tragic fate, once Oroonoko has extracted the last breath from her frame in the same way that he had to kill the tiger who was protecting her young and the tiger who was living with the bulletted heart, he lays her "japan'd" body to rest. "As soon as he had done, he laid the body decently on leaves and flowers, of which he made a bed, and conceal'd it under the same cover-lid of Nature; only her face he left yet bare to look on" (Behn 218). By imagining the carvings of Imoinda's body to be of flowers and birds, components of the natural world of Coramantien, and that her final resting

place should also be described as laid upon the “leaves and flowers” of Suriname, we can surmise that her body is inextricably linked with the lands of her inhabitation and that the land of Coramantien will now become part of the fertility of Suriname. The perpetual spring that the narrator describes will have been watered by the blood and body of these transplanted peoples.

In his excavating of the Asian aesthetic in *Oroonoko*, Chi-ming Yang presents an explanation for Behn’s “tigers” with the idea that they are *mythical*. “The tiger, at once real and mythical, marks and tests the boundary between the arable land and the forest, the human and the animal” (247). His reading, perhaps, offers readers a link to see parts of *Oroonoko* with a magical realism influence. I would differ with Yang and find his mythical tigers to be very real in the form of Oroonoko and Imoinda –transported creatures who have had to adopt to a new environment, have attempted to adapt, have developed their own habitat in the natural environment, but who are hunted and bothered at every turn by the people who cargo-ed them across ocean-ways, involuntarily ripped from their home, and re-named to fit the understanding of the Western knowledge. Imoinda is brave beautiful and constant. She has not been remembered to the same degree as her beloved, but this bequest of Behn’s narrator can continue to be explored so long as scholars like Joan Anim-Addo insist on finding ways to amplify the traces of agency and voice within these lines.

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