

AUTHORIAL CONTEXTS

The Early Modern Body in Behn's Poetry and *Oroonoko*

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Like many both inside and outside the academy, my students tend to read anachronistically. They view early modern minds and bodies entirely from a twenty-first-century perspective, and the idea not only that social and cultural environments in the early modern period might have differed radically from theirs but also that bodies might have been experienced far differently makes them skeptical if not queasy. For my current students, nothing is more naturalized than their male or female bodies.

Consequently, investigating the early modern humoral body is useful preparation both for Behn's slyly gendered amatory poetry and for the peculiar "body language" of *Oroonoko*. Understanding the uncertainties of early modern embodiment offers students a way to grasp the seemingly extravagant language and behavior displayed in *Oroonoko*, and the disturbing trope of self-demonstrating anatomy brings coherence to the darker side of Behn's complex achievement.

Before turning to the ambiguously gendered bodies in Behn's poetry and the excessively dramatic ones in *Oroonoko*, my students and I indulge in humor—four of them: black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm. These substances constituted the physiology and psychology of early modern persons (Lindemann 69). If the humors were unbalanced by inner swellings or external environmental forces, illness occurred; when they were stopped up—when these fluids could not move freely within the body or pass easily in and out of it—such blockages caused distress to mind and body. From the time of Hippocrates (c. 450–c. 370 BCE) and Galen (129–c. 200 CE) until the seventeenth century and

beyond, a mixture of what Mary Lindemann calls "*environmentalism and humoralism*" (9) conditioned perceptions of the body and its health. This complex and layered Hippocratic-Galenic tradition descended from the Greek physicians and Aristotle and was then altered by Arab physicians, through whose manuscripts it was passed on. Changing and developing through the centuries, these humoral and corporeal perceptions determined the physiological well-being and the psychological health of most of the Western world (Nutton).

Emotions not only were dependent on the body's humoral balance but also were thought to flow. Ulinka Rublack observes that the classical humanist education taught that a proper balance of emotion necessitated both "relativizing" and "expressing feelings" (3). Like Sigmund Freud three centuries later, Francis Bacon felt that repressed emotions were unhealthy. In fact, in "Of Friendship," he writes, "A principal fruit of friendship is the ease and discharge of the fullness and swellings of the heart" (*Essays* 139). Mind and body were materially interrelated. If feelings "swelled the heart," then such a literal enlargement was physically and mentally dangerous unless relieved by "verbal transmission," as Rublack notes (3).

Interdependence of mind and body seems remarkably modern, but when we imagine the body's interior today, we most likely think of organs, not fluids. If jaundiced and aching, we probably think it's the kidney or liver, not bile, and when an invading organism attacks, we boot the alien body out of our own and return to normal health. In the early modern period, there was no such thing as normal health. Degrees of physical well-being depended on how well a person balanced the fluid humors and managed those external influences that determined the degree of one's sickness or health. As Lindemann observes, "Standard therapies . . . depended on readjusting perceived imbalances either by siphoning off a humor that had grown too strong or become corrupt, or by bleeding, purging, [or] vomiting" (10).

Today we see and feel our skins as impermeable protective barriers between our inner organs and the outside world. The early modern body, however, was not a self-contained and enclosed entity but a leaky bag of fluids. Influences and vapors flowed in at will, altering the health and attitudes of the body; humors, juices, and, in extremis, vital spirits flowed out. Bodily organs were important but only in relation to the fluids on which they depended. The heart sank or trembled, and blood froze not metaphorically but literally. Further, most of my students firmly believe that "male" and "female" are genitally defined, ahistorical, and essentialized physical categories. They are not entirely happy to learn that, as Thomas Laqueur observes,

sex is a shaky foundation. Changes in corporeal structures, or the discovery that things were not as they seemed at first, could push a body from one juridical category (female) to another (male). These categories were based on gender distinctions—active/passive, hot/cold, formed/

unformed, informing/formable—of which an external or an internal penis was only the diagnostic sign. (135)

In effect, sexual category in the seventeenth century was determined not primarily by organs but by the heat and dryness characteristic of the male body or by the coolness and dampness that determined the sex of the female body.

Once early modern bodies have been historicized and genders destabilized, we can turn to Behn's amatory poetry to see how our informed corporeal understanding affects interpretation. Her "imperfect enjoyment" poem "The Disappointment" (*Works* [Todd] 1: 65–69), possibly composed as part of a group competition that included John Wilmot, earl of Rochester, reconceives Rochester's "Imperfect Enjoyment" poem by capitalizing on one of the worst libertine embarrassments and, using the traditional characteristics of males and females as outlined in humoral theory, reverses the genders of the participants.

A libertine shepherd, Lysander, propelled perhaps by the urge to rebalance his bodily fluids, "[s]urpriz'd fair *Cloris*" in a "Thicket" (lines 3, 11). *Cloris* "[p]ermits his Force" (14), while seeming also to resist. When Lysander persists, *Cloris* ambiguously faints away. Lysander, so overwhelmed by the sight of her body through her "loose thin *Robes*" (63), is unfortunately "too transported" (72) to rise to the occasion.

Since, according to humoral theory, the difference between men and women lies in their body heat and moisture, the hot, dry, masculine Lysander presses his "burning trembling Hand" (line 36) to the moist *Cloris*'s "Snowy Brest" (37)—cool as well as white. Her eyes cast a "Humid Light" (56), and love's "Altar" is a "Fountain where Delight still flows" (45, 49). While *Cloris* is the epitome of moist, early modern womanhood, the overheated Lysander suffers from extreme humoral imbalance. With the fluid flow of his emotion blocked, his ardor decidedly dampens as his "Insensible" falls "weeping in his Hand" (90). *Cloris*, returning from the convenient faint, reaches for "that Fabulous *Priapus*, / That Potent God" (105–06) but finds "that God of her Desires / Disarm'd of all his Awful Fires, / And Cold as Flow'rs bath'd in the Morning-Dew" (112–13). Not only is Lysander cold and damp, but *Cloris* suddenly heats up with "Confusion" (115): "The Blood forsook the hinder Place, / And strew'd with Blushes all her Face" (116–17). *Cloris* leaves Lysander cursing, in usual libertine fashion, "the *Shepherdess's* Charms" (139). He is cold, limp, damp, and faint—in short, he is female. The lovers have switched sexes. Behn evokes the Hippocratic-Galenic anatomical understanding of male and female while exploiting Restoration uncertainty about sexual categories.¹

The early modern period marked a crucial transition from Hippocratic-Galenic perceptions of the body to what we consider modern views of physiology and anatomy. Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica libri septem* (1543), strikingly illustrated with self-demonstrating anatomical figures, was foundational to a new, empirical anatomy, as were William Harvey's observations of blood circulation.² Critical to this change in corporeal understanding were the

remarkable early modern anatomy theaters of Europe and Britain. These anatomical displays became so fashionable that there arose, as Jonathan Sawday points out, a "culture of dissection" that involved a "network of practices, social structures, and rituals surrounding [the] production of fragmented bodies" (2).

The way people experienced their bodies changed slowly. Harvey himself, despite revolutionizing the early modern understanding of the cardiovascular system, was in fact theoretically as traditional in his notions about the body and its humoral composition as were most anatomists and physicians of the Restoration. Like paradigms of sexual difference, old and new epistemologies of the body existed together well into the nineteenth century. The resourceful Behn, therefore, might plausibly have deployed the extant paradigms of medical knowledge to present in her works both humoral and anatomical embodiment and, more darkly, vivisection and dismemberment. Richard Sugg observes in a discussion of vivisection that no one in the Renaissance advocated human vivisection, but "various figures seemed ready to believe that the practice might be carried out by their contemporaries" (164). Indeed, if Behn was seeking a way to represent the violence and horror that she claims to have witnessed in Surinam, the new anatomy texts, with their brilliantly executed figures of live dissected figures holding apart incisions that cut deep into the interior walls of abdomen, bowels, and brain, offered her examples.³

But before my students and I encounter the desperate and demoralized Prince Oroonoko "severing" the face from his dead wife's body (61), we meet him as he becomes, in the language of the traditional, humoral paradigm, increasingly blocked and unbalanced. Internal imbalance and social and cultural impotence plunge him into what Noga Arikha describes as a "[h]ypochondriac" disease caused by "excessive black bile" and, "by definition, melancholic" (114). Oroonoko has shown early signs of this disorder. His first excessive display of emotion and the increasingly violent ones that follow demonstrate the effects of stoppages that block the healthy discharge of black bile and thus cause attacks of melancholia.

His first humoral blockage occurs at seventeen, when his mentor, the "old General," dies saving his life by taking an arrow through the eye, and the prince, a lifelong warrior, must assume leadership of his country's army "afflicted as [he] was" (12). Then, blissful over Imoinda, Oroonoko returns to court "with quite another Humour than before" (15). However, he must hide—stop up—his feelings, because his grandfather also desires Imoinda, and she must comply, becoming part of his grandfather's harem. Imoinda and the prince continue to stop up their passion until Imoinda, flooded with moist, gender-appropriate grief, dissolves in humoral tears as she is led against her will to the royal (and ironically appropriate) ceremonial bath by the impotent old king, who in turn is unbalanced by disproportionate "new Sparks of Love" (16). To my students, Behn's seemingly excessive descriptions in *Oroonoko* begin to make ominous, rhetorical sense. Despite the ironic complexities at work in the text, the extreme responses of these characters and the hyperbole Behn deliberately deploys at

first seem bizarre to our modern, semidisembodied understanding of emotion. For the early modern Behn, however, these emotional responses and psychological behaviors are directly instantiated by the physiological imbalance of the humoral body.

Oroonoko, hearing of Imoinda's alleged death as he is about to engage the enemy, immediately vows that "henceforth he wou'd never lift a Weapon, or draw a Bow; but abandon the small Remains of his Life to Sighs and Tears and the continual Thoughts of what his Lord and Grand-father had thought good to send out of the World" (28). Sunk in depression and awash in black bile, he tells his troops that they should "*behold Oroonoko, the most wretched, and abandon'd by Fortune, of all the Creation of the Gods*" (28). He finally rouses himself to regain the field, but his prior shockingly feminized and unmilitary behavior marks the end of the amatory phase of his physioemotional devolution.

Since raging passions occur even before Oroonoko and Imoinda are forced into foreign circumstances, where can melancholic language turn for the representational resources to express the vivisectional violence ahead? The vocabulary of traditional natural philosophy was adequate, perhaps, for the turbulent vicissitudes of romance in both poetry and prose, but in Surinam Behn's noble victims face the lethally comprehensive cruelty of racism and betrayal. In 1688, when an older Behn, personally and politically disenchanting, published *Oroonoko*, her disillusioned imagination may have recognized in the empirical but startlingly transgressive practices of dissection, and, implicitly, of vivisection, a violent lexicon of tropes that exploited the harsh and intrusive implications that lurked just beneath the skin of the new science.

Indeed, in her discursive choices, the ill and aging author might have profoundly identified not only with her younger self but also with the colonized, ambiguously noble, but ultimately powerless Oroonoko, who in the end controlled nothing but Imoinda's death and mutilation and the dissection of his own body. Behn's account of his self-mutilation after he kills Imoinda is infused with a phantasmagoric violence that is a qualitative leap beyond her previous humoral tropes.

His revolt a failure, his wife and unborn child dead, he lies prostrate, enfeebled by grief, for eight days beside Imoinda's corpse (61–62). But any lofty sentiment or nobility lurking in the language or circumstances of the scene is obliterated, because Imoinda's body, like the dismembered parts on a dissection table, has begun to stink of decomposition (62). When the unbalanced prince is overtaken by the English, who, their own violence notwithstanding, are horrified at his, he tries but fails to explain his act. Mere words are not enough. Transmogrified quite literally into a tragic figure of anatomical demonstration, he raises his knife against the English in defiant scorn: "*Look ye, ye faithless Crew, said he, 'tis not Life I seek, nor am I afraid of Dying; and, at that Word, cut a piece of Flesh from his own Throat, and threw it at 'em*" (62–63).

In part, Oroonoko invokes the bizarre heroism of the war captains of Surinam, who before an engagement vied for the generalship by hacking off parts of

their own faces in a demonstration of self-dissection designed to reveal not their corporeal interiors but their "passive Valour" (50). A well-balanced Oroonoko once considered this "a sort of Courage too Brutal to be applauded" but "express'd his Esteem of 'em" (50). Now a general no more, he appropriates their indigenous qualities. To elevate his status above the "*shameful Whip*" (63), he eviscerates himself in a tortured display of self-demonstrating dissection.

Back at Parham, a "Chirurgeon" attempts to reassemble the nearly departed hero, but Oroonoko appears to the narrating Behn "like a Death's Head black'd over; nothing but Teeth, and Eyeholes" (63). This starkly complex image unites the Renaissance *vanitas* emblem with the accurately illustrative, skeletal images from the anatomies, under color of slavery, to produce a newly constructed and ghastly representation of blind rage and racial subjugation. Oroonoko in his vivisectional orgy eloquently carves into his own flesh the hieroglyphics of his pride and humiliation. Behn's intense and repugnant drama of the "Death's Head" displaces and effaces Oroonoko's own faceless victim, his spousal possession, whom according to the customs of his country he has the right to kill as an expression of love (61). The narratorial Behn seems to ask us to practice a kind of cultural relativism by identifying with the betrayed and enslaved "Caesar," whose child, as a slave, would belong not to him but to the slave owners. He is driven to destroy his unborn child to preserve not the object of his passion—but his own paternity.

As we reach Oroonoko's final, "pyre-rhic" moment, while we recognize that execution is the classic punishment for all traitors to the English crown, we must also recognize another morbid, autoptic parody in the outrageous dissective dismemberment and immolation that accompanies Oroonoko's execution (64). In this scene, satirist Behn has given us a fully realized, self-demonstrating "live anatomy" inside out: "Caesar" stands calmly with a pipe instead of a knife, demonstrating not his dissected anatomy but the vivisection itself. His organs, instead of being exposed, disappear one by one into the fire. Instead of revealing a more exact anatomy, he is rendered limb by limb corporeally invisible, revealing the repellent anatomy of slavery and social brutality. At the beginning of her account, the narratorial Behn hails Oroonoko as a nobly attractive hero, but at the conclusion of his story, the authorial Behn leaves him a uxoricide without even a body to stand in.

In her poetry, Behn slyly manipulates traditional humoral theories to undermine sexual difference and satirize conventional attitudes and amatory rituals. In the classroom, the unbalanced humors of bodies in love offer playful trajectories of meaning that students are quick to appreciate. In *Oroonoko*, in addition to conventional romance motifs, Behn is concerned with issues of violence, race, gender, and political injustice. For these darker, more dangerous issues, she turns, perhaps, to the new physiology for the more violent tropes generated by the intrusions of dissection and by the brutality of vivisection. Student readers, now familiar with the play of humors in her poetry, are prepared to appreciate this disturbing representational transformation. They more readily

understand how the body of the noble prince, constructed in a theory of humors, is then dismembered and destroyed by racism, betrayal, and bitterness. The language of Romantic excess that puzzles students is more understandable in the context of a historical and social violence expressed through dissective and vivisectional tropes taken from the discourse of the new science.

Intractable ambiguities about both narratorial and authorial attitudes remain in *Oroonoko*: humoral theory, anatomy, and dissection may have lent themselves to a parody that is now hard to determine. But approaching this complex work first through Behn's poetry and then through both the traditional humoral body and the new science offers us additional, culturally relevant ways to read *Oroonoko*.

NOTES

¹ Many other Behn poems play on the unstable nature of sex and gender categories. See "On a Juniper-Tree, Cut Down to Make Busks," "To the Fair Clarinda, Who Made Love to Me, Imagin'd more than Woman," "Song (I Led My Silvia to a Grove)," "A Letter to a Brother of the Pen in Tribulation," "Verses Designed by Mrs. A. Behn, to Be Sent to a Fair Lady, That Desir'd She Would Absent Herself, to Cure Her Love: Left Unfinished," "To Amintas, upon Reading the Lives of Some of the Romans," "Ovid to Julia: A Letter," "Song (While, Iris, I at Distance Gaze)," and "Song: Love Arm'd" (all in *Works* [Todd] 1).

² The original Latin text of *De Motu Cordis* was published in 1628 and the Latin text of *De Circulatione Sanguinis* in 1649. The first English translation of both was published in 1653.

³ For this self-demonstrating figure and a gallery of other medical and anatomical images, including Vesalius's famous muscle men, see the Wellcome Institute image collection online (<http://images.wellcome.ac.uk/>). Additionally, the Anatomia Collection at the University of Toronto has hundreds of easily accessed plates online (<http://link.library.utoronto.ca/anatomia/application/index.cfm>). Illustrations for some of the new anatomy texts were done by artists like Michelangelo and Albrecht Dürer, and these illustrations were available to the literate English person when Behn was writing *Oroonoko*. Three print sources for images from the history of anatomy and physiology are J. B. deC. M. Saunders and Charles D. O'Malley, *The Illustrations from the Works of Andreas Vesalius of Brussels*; Robert Beverly Hale and Terrence Coyle, *Albinus on Anatomy with Eighty Original Albinus Plates*; and Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace, *Spectacular Bodies: The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now*.