

For 'tis labour indeed that puts the difference of value on everything; and let any one consider, what the difference is between an Acre of Land planted with Tobacco or Sugar, sown with Wheat or Barley; and an Acre of the same Land lying in common, without any Husbandry upon it, and he will find, that the improvement of labour makes the far greater part of the value. (p. 314)

While Locke is of course talking about West Indian conditions at a slightly later point, it is probable that Milton's frame of reference for the New World would not have been so very different.

- 26 Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor and the Origins of Personal Life* (Berkeley and London, 1992), p. 197.
- 27 The new individual whom Armstrong and Tennenhouse herald is, rather paradoxically, a female whose literate Englishness survives immersion within the alien environment of non-British Indians and whose writing of a captivity narrative announces the existence of the new discourse produced by the autonomous individual who has no other cultural authority for writing than the exercise of this "Englishness."
- 28 Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*: "In 1697 Barbados, with its 166 square miles, was worth more to British capitalism than New England, New York and Pennsylvania combined" (p. 54).
- 29 Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 4th series (Boston, 1863), VI, pp. 537, 539.
- 30 For the contemporary association of black skin color with the curse on Ham, see "George Best's Discourse," in Richard Hakluyt, ed., *The Principal Voyages* (12 vols., Glasgow, 1904), VII, pp. 263-4; Sir Thomas Browne, "Of the Same" in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 518-19. For a discussion of the curse in the Arab world, see David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984), pp. 42-3.
- 31 For a discussion of the *Lusiads* which lends some weight to this suggestion, see Quint, *Epic and Empire*, p. 105.

8 Feathers and flies: Aphra Behn and the seventeenth-century trade in exotica

Margaret W. Ferguson

This essay was initially composed for a conference that occurred in October 1992, 500 years after Columbus landed on the Bahamian island he would name San Salvador, the English would later rename Watling, and the native inhabitants called Guanahani. Reflecting on that historically contested occasion and on its quincennial anniversary, I seek to yoke the famous but still culturally mystified figure of Columbus with a female figure who has re-emerged into historical visibility partly as a consequence of revisionary feminist scholarship that has taken place during the last fifteen years in the US and UK academies, scholarship which has begun to penetrate various territories heretofore occupied most visibly by white men. The female figure upon whom I am focusing here poses some thorny questions for academic scholars, especially those who call themselves feminists, working in first-world educational institutions today. Though much feminist "recovery" scholarship has had an obliquely celebratory dimension (it is of course genuinely exciting, not to mention narcissistically gratifying, to find examples of brilliant literate women like Aemilia Lanier and Elizabeth Cary in an arena of literary study that had seemed, until recently, nearly empty of female writing subjects), I focus here on Aphra Behn partly because she dramatizes, among other things, the need for anti-celebratory labors. She shows, in particular, the need for skepticism about our own psychic investments in our objects of study, especially, but not only, when those objects have the allure of being historical female subjects endowed with some degree of power or agency – Queen Elizabeth, for example, or a writer like Behn.

My chief aim in linking Behn with Columbus at the outset is to look again, and from an oblique but I hope interesting perspective, at the paradigm of discovery and conquest which Columbus and many of his male successors articulated in terms of a masculine penetration of a feminized landscape. Behn invites a reconsideration of this paradigm, which has been brilliantly analyzed by Louis Montrose,¹ because she seems to have been the first European woman to write a first-person narrative – like Columbus's journals, a disturbing mixture of fact and

fiction about her encounter with a part of the New World and its inhabitants. By the time she wrote – nearly 200 years after Columbus – America included not only the people Columbus called Indians but enslaved Africans as well.

Born around 1640 in social circumstances her biographers still debate. Behn journeyed with her family to the then-British colony of Guiana in the early 1660s; her father, most likely an adoptive father, was supposed to assume the governorship of the colony. Instead, he died at sea, leaving Aphra Behn to her own devices during a colonial sojourn that may have lasted anywhere from two months to four years.² Nearly thirty years later, and almost two decades after the English had lost Guiana to the Dutch in a move Behn deeply regretted (according to the treaty of Breda in 1667, the English traded Guiana for Manhattan), she wrote about her South American experiences – and, in particular, about her friendship with a noble black prince who rebelled against his slave status and was brutally executed as a result – in her novella *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave*. Her youthful colonial journey, which some early twentieth-century critics argued was a product of her imagination and plagiarizing talents but which most modern scholars accept as having in fact occurred (there is documentary evidence of her presence in the colony from the acting governor who despised her!), also informs her obliquely autobiographical play set in the North American colony of Jamestown and entitled *The Widow Ranter or the History of Bacon*. This play, probably written in 1688, as was *Oroonoko*, was not published or staged until 1690, the year following Behn's death.

Behn's late works about the New World prompt me to ask the following question: what difference does it make to our understanding of Early Modern ideologies of gender when a woman's (written) voice gives a version of the paradigm of New World appropriation I mentioned earlier – the paradigm according to which a European male subject voyages to a New World he describes as a feminized Edenic object, a locus of desire, ripe for penetration? What happens when that act of appropriation, which includes the appropriation of non-European voices for the purposes of a story, comes from a female European subject – who happens to be English, of uncertain social estate, and a supporter of the House of Stuart? I want to look at Aphra Behn standing, as it were, and writing as an heir of Columbus, looking still at a feminized Edenic landscape but looking at it, and at its inhabitants, through eyes conditioned by not only her gender but also her nationality, by her inscription in a particular stage of the colonial enterprise, and, last but not least, by what we might call professional or educational formation, which in Behn's case entailed depending for her living

not only on her “female pen,” as she calls it, but also on the institution of the theater.

Let me make it clear that I am *not* primarily interested in assessing what difference Behn's gendered perspective on the New World, in conjunction with other constituents of her multiple subject positions, made to the history of colonialism *per se*. The short and brutal answer to that question would be very little, if any, despite the desire on the part of some feminist scholars to celebrate Behn's novella as an influential document in the early history of the abolition movement.³ There is no doubt that Behn's portrait of the noble Oroonoko, his beautiful wife Imoinda, and their unhappy fates at the hands of hypocritical white Englishmen did influence abolitionist sentimental discourse, as Laura Brown has shown;⁴ but there are strong reasons for not crediting humanitarianism as a major cause of abolition. Moreover, there are significant limits to – and contradictions in – Behn's apparently sympathetic attitude toward her noble enslaved Africans, not to mention toward the natives whom she sometimes distinguishes from and sometimes conflates with the Africans. A major limit to Behn's sympathies has to do with ideologies of social status: if she laments the unjust enslavement of Oroonoko and Imoinda, partly because like many seventeenth-century English women she saw analogies between the slave's plight and that of the unhappily married wife, she extends no sympathy to lower-class Africans, whom she presents as “naturally” cowardly. She signals their imputed baseness by a color distinction that may surprise readers conditioned by modern forms of racism: they are brown whereas Oroonoko and Imoinda are ebony black.⁵

A second limit to Behn's critical stance appears in a move of ideological containment that strikes me as interestingly parallel to a move Milton makes in *Paradise Lost*: both authors, one a Royalist, the other a Republican, implicitly underwrite the slave trade pursued by Cromwell as well as by the Restored Stuarts. Milton and Behn both follow Francis Bacon's tactic in “On Plantations.” The tactic consists of idealizing a benignly “English” form of agricultural plantation while demonizing – in Milton's case literally – a greedy mercantile form of colonialism which both Bacon and Milton associate with mining the earth for gold. Milton's portrait of Satan as a merchant adventurer smelling Eden's spices and eager for spoil (*Paradise Lost* Book IV) contrasts with the epic vision of God as a father who makes his human creatures “stewards” or good “husbands” of a very fertile (wifely) garden and who offers his creatures, through Raphael, the chance to come home to the metropolis – eventually – if they obey his “easy yoke.” Behn offers a similar ideologically charged contrast between a Satanic

merchant, a sea-captain who betrays Oroonoko into slavery, and the benign absolute monarch to whom she addresses two elegiac “advertisements” for Guiana’s beauty and riches. Behn’s willingness to criticize the unjust enslavement of noble black princes but not the system of colonial appropriation which fundamentally fueled the slave trade provides us with ample reason not to romanticize her; but I would also warn against the temptation of feeling morally superior to her, especially if one entertains Eric Williams’s powerful though by no means uncontested argument, in *Capitalism and Slavery*, that “abolition of the slave trade and emancipation of the slaves in the British colonies were driven not by philanthropy or humanitarianism but by economic forces within England.”⁶

Although the primary question I am posing in this paper concerns Behn’s effect on a *model* of colonial history rather than her effect on that history’s course, the distinction, as Michel de Certeau suggests in his meditations on the peculiar structures of Western historiographical practice, is neither absolute nor ideologically innocent,⁷ especially since the gendered model of appropriation Montrose has analyzed for the sixteenth century arguably continues to do consequential ideological work in modern times, for instance in some of the justificatory arguments that US politicians made recently for the importance – to Mexicans’ own “development” – of the so-called free trade agreement (NAFTA) with Mexico’s hardly “freely elected” current government. In any event, to begin to assess the small but not insignificant deviations Behn makes from the “penetration” model, as we might call it, I want to compare her version of a central metaphor of colonialist description – the New World as Eden – with passages in Columbus’s letter about his first voyage and in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Each of these passages represents a paradigmatic scene of looking at the bodies of those who inhabit, but are soon to be dispossessed of, a paradisaical landscape. In each passage, a paradox or contradiction arises concerning the binary opposition between nakedness and clothedness: moreover, in each passage that paradox points to conceptual and moral problems about who is fallen and what fallenness entails. It clearly entails something different for women and men, and Behn’s passage helps us see that the difference has to do with the idea of ornament and beyond that, with the problem of *luxury*.

In his letter to Gabriel Sanchez describing his first voyage, a text published and translated repeatedly from 1493 onward, Columbus details the riches of Española with (dare I say) fairly naked lust to possess the island’s spices and gold; and he goes on to remark that the people of Española “all go naked, men and women, as their mothers bore them, although some of the women cover a single place with the leaf

of a plant or with a net of cotton.”⁸ One might initially take the subordinate clause simply as a qualification of the main clause, but I want to suggest that there are significant economic, moral, and even theological issues lurking in the apparently trivial problem of how a totalizing proposition (all go naked) can conjoin with a gendered exception which requires us, logically, either to reconceive nakedness as something other than an all-or-nothing notion or to wonder whether the subclass of women somehow does not fully belong to the general category “all natives.” Two illustrators of Columbus’s letter dramatize the problem: one (fig. 8.1), from an illustrated version of the letter published in 1493, shows the native women as naked in the sense of absolutely unclothed; a second (fig. 8.2), from a 1495 edition of Dati’s version of the letter, depicts them as cinctured around the “single place” with leaves.

Milton offers a complex analogue to this paradox when in Book IV of *Paradise Lost* he initially describes Adam and Eve as “clad” only in “naked majesty” (290) but, fourteen lines later, describes Eve but not Adam as in effect partially clothed:

She as a veil down to the slender waist
Her unadorned golden tresses wore
Dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved
As the vine curls her tendrils, which implied
Subjection.

(304–8)⁹

The Miltonic narrator, whose perspective has interestingly blended with Satan’s here (recall that it is through Satan’s tormented eyes that the entire Edenic primal scene unfolds), clearly creates a male subject position for the reader–voyeur, who is teased, even titillated, by having his gaze directed not to the lower part of the female body, as we would expect, but to her breasts instead. The passage merits more discussion than I can give it here (and might initiate a discussion of the Miltonic narrator’s very labile sexual perspective in other contexts that suggest colonialist encounters – for instance the scene in Book V when a gorgeously feathered Raphael visits Adam and Eve and folds his middle set of wings around his waist, and presumably his loins, before joining them for that uncooked dinner served by a naked Eve for whom the angel is pointedly said *not* to feel lust). My point here is that Milton revises a statement about a general human nakedness into the “exception” of a specifically gendered veiling, which modulates subsequently



Figure 8.1 "Insula Hispana," illustration from Columbus's letter to Gabriel Sanchez: "La lettera dell'isola" (Basel, 1493).

La lettera dell'isole che ha trouato nouamente el Re dispagna

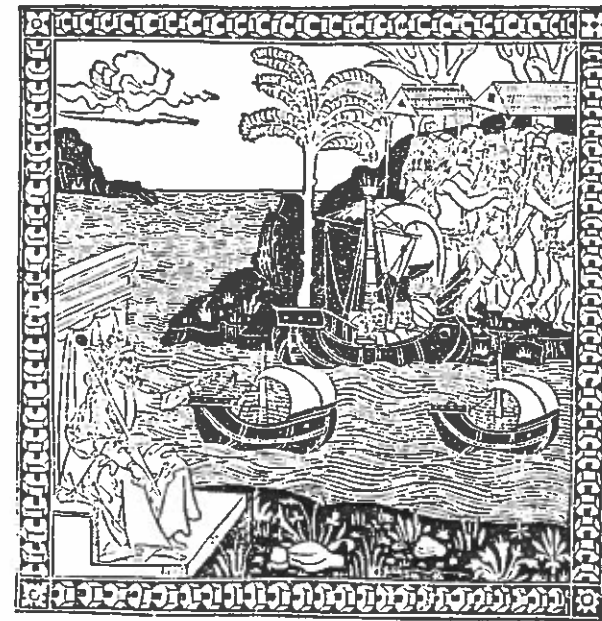


Figure 8.2 Title page of Giuliano Dati's poetical paraphrase of Columbus. "Lettera dell'isole" (Florence, 1495).

into an insistence on the visibility of both Adam's and Eve's private parts: this visibility is, however, occluded for the reader by the typically Miltonic mediating language of negation and temporal contrast:

Nor those mysterious parts were then conceal'd,
Then was not guilty Shame.

(IV.312-13)

Milton's language, which draws here on the noble savage trope so central to colonialist discourse, works to create a split subject position – between desire and guilt – for the male narrator and implied male reader:

the language works also to give epistemological and moral force to a perception of difference considerably more subtle than we find in Columbus's vacillation between condescending praise for the "good" Indians' naïve generosity and invective against the "bad" Indians' cannibalism.¹⁰ Milton's text suggests that one cannot grasp ontological difference – for instance the difference between fallen and unfallen being – simply by means of a binary opposition (naked: them / clothed: us): one must rather disrupt somehow the perceiver's ordinary conceptual categories so that an idea of nakedness that is *also not* nakedness can come, however partially, into existence. Even in Milton's linguistic practice, however, a sophisticated conception of difference comes decked in the now-familiar model of the woman as an object of desire *between* men.

In Behn's version of the Edenic scene, we encounter, in contrast, a narrator-viewer who occupies both a male subject position – constituted by her status as English, white, a collector of exotic objects, and an author wielding a pen – and a female subject position constituted not only by her historical gender but also by her connection with an institution, the theater, that had long been tainted, as women themselves were, by its association with the realm of ornament, with "superfluous things,"¹¹ with excessive desires. The connection with the theater, moreover, is dramatized in the passage in question with reference to another and equally interesting cultural institution, the "Antiquary" or "Cabinet of Curiosities."¹² The passage occurs immediately after the narrator has claimed an eye-witness veracity for the history she is about to relate and has promised not to "adorn" the narrative "with any accidents, but such as arrived in earnest" to Oroonoko. She now breaks her word, as she is to do again and again in the novella, with the chutzpah of the classical Cretan liar, whose paradox takes the form, "All Cretans are liars. I am a Cretan." Behn in fact digresses fulsomely, in what can only be called an embellishment on the subject of adornment, about the marvels of a world to which neither she nor her African hero are native.¹³ Having made a problematic distinction between the black Africans, whom the English "make use of to work in our Plantations of Sugar," and native Indians with whom the English live "in perfect harmony, without daring to command 'em," she goes on to describe how the English trade with the Indians for marvellous birds, and for prodigious snake skins which she compares, for her metropolitan readers, to

one that may be seen at his Majesty's Antiquary; where are also some rare Flies, of amazing Forms and Colours, presented to 'em by my self; some as big as my Fist, some less; and all of various Excellencies, such as Art cannot imitate. Then we trade for Feathers, which they order into all Shapes, make themselves little short Habits of em, and glorious wreaths for their Heads, Necks, Arms and Legs,

whose Tinctures are unconceivable. I had a Set of these presented to me, and I gave 'em to the King's Theatre, and it was the Dress of the Indian Queen, infinitely admir'd by Persons of Quality; and was unimitable. (p. 2)

That very headdress is evidently reproduced in an eighteenth-century engraving said to represent the famous actress Anne Bracegirdle (1674–1748; see fig. 8.3). The engraving portrays her, ironically, not playing the heroine of Dryden's *The Indian Queen*, the play of 1664 set in Mexico to which Behn is referring in the passage, but rather playing Semernia, the North American Indian Queen of Behn's own (posthumously produced) *The Widow Ranter*.¹⁴

I shall return to this image and to Behn's interesting textual gesture of advertising her own connection with the "King's Theatre." For the moment, I want to consider her subsequent description of the Indians' skill in creating ornaments. She mentions the beaded aprons

they wear just before 'em, as *Adam* and *Eve* did the Fig-leaves . . . They thread these Beads also on long Cotton-threads, and make Girdles to tie their Aprons to, which come twenty times, or more, about the Waste, and then cross, like a Shoulder-belt, both ways, and round their Necks, Arms, and Legs. This Adornment, with their long black Hair, and the Face painted in little specks or flowers here and there, makes 'em a wonderful Figure to behold. (pp. 2–3)

After this elaborate description of ornament and paint on the natives' bodies, which is followed by a moment of striking gender-asymmetry – a sensuous description of the women's reddish, smooth, soft, and sleek skin – Behn returns to, but also radically alters, the analogy between the Indians and Adam and Eve:

though they are all thus naked, if one lives for ever among 'em, there is not to be seen an undecent Action, or Glance: and being continually us'd to see one another so unadorn'd, so like our first Parents before the Fall, it seems as if they had no Wishes, there being nothing to heighten Curiosity; but all you can see, you see at once, and every moment see; and where there is no Novelty, there can be no Curiosity.

In this passage, Behn repeatedly, almost dizzyingly, contradicts herself on a number of points: on the issue of whether the natives are naked or not, she insists so elaborately that they are both, and compares them so explicitly both to the fig-leaved and to the unfallen Adam and Eve, that one suspects she is writing with a very large tongue – or pen – in her cheek. Her doubled reference to Adam and Eve exposes, I think, a problem that lurks at the heart of the Edenic metaphor in Early Modern literature; her text therefore clarifies aspects of the ideological work done by the paradoxical descriptions of the natives as both naked and not naked in all three examples I've adduced. If the natives are naked, then



Figure 8.3 Mezzotint engraving by W. Vincent, probably of Anne Bracegirdle in the role of the Indian Queen Semernia in Behn's *The Widow Ranter*.

they are not only like Adam and Eve *before* the fall, but we, the colonists, are either superfluous to their blissful state or, worse, like Satan, filled with greed and desire to destroy it. If, however, the natives, and especially the native women, are cinctured around the genitals, then they are like Adam and Eve after the fall, and we can legitimate our profit-taking desires under the guise of bringing Christian salvation to the heathen. On the third hand – and this is the one I think Behn not only exposes but extends – if we see the natives, *pace* Aristotle's law of non-contradiction, as at once innocently naked and ornamentally covered, then we deflect attention from the ethical and theological problems of our presence in an Edenic place onto something that seems to link the natives with us via a desire for something we might paradoxically name a "necessary luxury." That concept, an emergent ideological construct which differed in significant ways from the concept of luxury defined (almost always in morally negative terms) by classical, Jewish, and Christian thinkers, was fostered by developments in the expanding market. Behn had a more capacious and less morally disapproving grasp of this brainchild of capitalism, the *necessary* luxury, than did many of her male contemporaries including mercantilist thinkers who continued to see luxury under the sign of *sin* and to associate it with female desire – arguably thereby displacing onto the ever-convenient weaker sex some of their own anxieties about the moral implications of the market's expansion.¹⁵ Perhaps because as a woman and as a playwright Behn was doubly implicated in the process of re-defining luxury for new historical conditions, she offers a very interesting perspective on the question.

The concept of luxury impinges on moral, economic, political, and psycho-sexual domains during the Early Modern – that is, early imperialist – era.¹⁶ Voltaire would suggest in the eighteenth century that luxury is an ahistorical phenomenon, whether as a subjective human desire or as the object thereof: luxury, he wrote, "is a thing that has been always despised and always loved" (quoted in Sekora, *Luxury*, p. 6). My argument here, however, is that the concept of luxury has a distinct though complex history which is distinctly (though again complexly) related to economic and political histories. To assess the significance of Behn's articulation of a significant change in the conceptualization of luxury, a change that involves, broadly speaking, loosening luxury from its status as a sin or moral error by implicitly defining it as a playful or *aesthetic* phenomenon, we need to consider two facets of the traditional notion of *luxuria* described by John Sekora (and further homogenized and thus oversimplified in my summary of Sekora's "history of ideas" narrative). First, for many classical, Jewish, and Christian authors, luxury was *the* foundational sin, the cause of war according to Socrates,

and, according to Plato's report, of such dubious cultural "superfluities" as poetry and the theater as well. Luxury also caused the decline of Roman civic virtue, according to Sallust and other Latin writers; and it was moreover the root cause of the fall from the biblical Eden. In Saint Ambrose's interesting assessment of the effects of that fall, "luxury is slavery" (*De officiis ministrorum*, quoted in Sekora, *Luxury*, p. 21). Second, there is, according to Sekora, "more consistency in the personification of luxury than with any other chief sin. With the major exception of *The Faerie Queene*, almost all personifications of luxury are feminine" (p. 44); she is portrayed by writers and artists from Prudentius through Cellini as a beautiful woman driving a splendid chariot.

Luxuria – the personification and objectification of a desire seen traditionally both as the cause of great evil and as prototypically female – plays a major if still under-analyzed role, as I have suggested, in Early Modern debates about the virtues and vices (or less moralistically, the pros and cons) of what came to be known as mercantilism. Early defenders and conceptualizers of mercantilism like Thomas Mun continually reprove the British consumer for upsetting the balance of trade by a taste for foreign luxuries,¹⁷ and the author of *Britannia Languens, or a Discourse of Trade* of 1680 was much exercised with the ways in which the English merchant and shopkeeper might "avoid Trading in Foreign Consumptive Goods."¹⁸ Moreover, as Louis Landa has shown in a fascinating article on Pope's portrait of Belinda, English guilds and economic writers blame women in particular for their extravagant tastes. In *The Weavers' Complaint Against the Calico Madams* (1719), for instance, the fashionable lady is denounced for her desire for "foreign trumpery" rather than good English wool; and in two numbers of a London newspaper that was entitled *General Remarks on Trade*, Charles Povey decries the losses England incurs by importing – from France – a series of goods clearly marked as feminine or effeminate: "fans, girdles, masks, looking glasses, feathers, pins, needles, and tortoise shell combs."¹⁹ The huge irony of such invectives against female luxury – a phrase that denotes, as I have suggested, both an excessive desire and the objects thereof – is that the transformation of ostensibly "superfluous" desires into needs was at the very heart of the expanding international capitalist system with its thriving trade in items like tobacco, sugar, and slaves – "goods" that were all publicly criticized, from their first appearance in Britain, as morally evil but which all became "necessary luxuries" over time. At the very time when mercantilists were arguing strenuously for a so-called "free" market, unhampered by royal monopolies (or, perversely, by colonial production),²⁰ the female and her always-already excessive desire seems to become a locus for male writers'

expressions of desire for restraint and control on the system of exchange for profit. If the problem of luxury is at the heart of the transition from a feudal to a capitalist mode of production – and the efforts to rationalize and justify the transition – it is fair to say that luxury comes on the scene of Renaissance cultural and economic debate not only gendered female but also often looking like a theatrical apparition.

The theater, indeed, like the royal curiosity cabinet, played an important role in extending Luxuria's sway to – and from – the New World. When Behn offers flies – by which I think she means butterflies rather than the buzzing type of insect – to the King's Kunstkammer and a feathered headdress to his theater, she dramatizes the ways in which both of those relatively new European institutions were coming to function as showcases for New World luxury objects, and also – in the case of the theater at least – as sites for displaying, *as* objects and for profit, the exotically garbed and painted and tattooed bodies of non-Europeans who were brought to the stages of European cities, and also European courts, to work in a highly paradoxical and still insufficiently understood fashion. Unlike the Africans and Indians pressed into manual slave labor in American mines and sugar plantations, persons of color who worked in various European theatrical spaces, among them public stages, royal entries, and courtly masques, labored at "playing" fantasized versions of themselves while displaying their bodies – and the fruits of their weaving and feather-working skills – for Europeans' pleasure. Jody Greene has recently argued, however, that in some cases these non-European performers may also have used their experience as objects of the European gaze to pursue their own personal and military aims, aims of the native *subject*, that is, which were not fully known to Renaissance Europeans and are also imperfectly known to modern scholars.²¹

In the early years of European colonialism, voyagers frequently brought Native Americans back to Europe; among the causes of the practice mentioned by Christian Feest in *Indians in Europe* were desires to give "living proof" of the voyage, to "arouse the curiosity of those who might fund or participate in future voyages," and to "cultivate interpreters."²² It is very unlikely that any of the early Indians crossed the Atlantic voluntarily (Feest, p. 614): the Aztec man represented in fig. 8.4, for instance, was brought as booty by his people's conqueror, Cortés, to the court of Charles V.²³ It is by no means certain, however, what economic and legal arrangements obtained for later Amerindian and African performers in Europe. Some small fraction of the former group, Jody Greene has argued, may have chosen to come to Europe, or come at the behest of their own fathers or tribal chiefs. Acknowledging the difficulties of evidence and interpretation that attend such an



Figure 8.4 Watercolor by Christoph Weiditz representing an Aztec man with a parrot at the court of Charles V in 1529.

argument (to what extent, for instance, are we to *believe* those travelers “who claim that their captives were actually volunteers” [Greene, “New Historicism,” p. 175]?). Greene usefully cautions against assuming too quickly (as she thinks many New Historicists have) that (most) Amer-

indians were simply “displayed” in Europe like the objects collected for curiosity cabinets. Yet in her eagerness to criticize a critical tendency to write as if the Native Americans had no agency in their visits to Europe, Greene arguably neglects some of the tricky political implications of her own position, which at times risks making the “conquest” of America into an “encounter” ultimately beneficial to the Indians.²⁴ The waters we are sailing between subject and object are ideologically stormy. Morализing polemic, at this point in the uneven development of “New World studies” within the field of Renaissance studies, often risks conjuring the parable of the mote in the brother’s (or sister’s) eye.

We know too little about both the subjectivities of non-Europeans who worked on European stages and the objective conditions under which they worked: what was the economic and legal status of those Indians and Africans who played in gorgeous costumes for aristocratic and common viewers such as those who witnessed Henri II’s entry into Rouen in 1550?²⁵ Were they slaves and if so, according to what laws? Did the laws of various countries and theatrical institutions treat Indians and Africans differently? A case of 1569 had determined that slave status (apparently, in general) would not be recognized in the “pure air” of England, for instance: but as Folarin Shyllon observes, in *Butts v. Penny* of 1677 a diametrically opposed opinion – here specified as pertaining to negroes – was upheld. The legal opinion that blacks could be considered “merchandise” (because they were “infidels,” which would also apply to most Native Americans) was in turn reversed (or rather, in Shyllon’s phrase, “not countenanced”) by Sir John Holt of the Court of the King’s Bench, who declared in various late seventeenth-century cases, culminating in *Smith v. Brone & Cooper* of 1701, that “as soon as a Negro comes into England, he becomes free: one may be a villein in England but not a slave.”²⁶ Judge Holt’s view may or may not have been shared by the judge who decided a case of 1687 mentioned in passing by Eric Williams, a case “involving an Amerindian, ‘a monster in the Indies,’ who had been exhibited in England for profit.”²⁷ Was the “exhibition for profit” illegal on the grounds that the Indian could not be treated as chattel in England’s pure air? I do not yet know the answer to this question, and Eric Williams gives me little help in pursuing it: he provides no annotation on the case or the court in which it was brought. This seems somehow ironic, given that Williams mentions this case in the course of discussing the “silence” of the seventeenth-century intelligentsia about the economic aspect of slavery. Modern literary scholars who seek to become less silent about the economics of slavery need not only curiosity but also money and time to comb English and other European countries’ legal records if we

want to account more precisely for the nature of the work represented in visual examples of "exotic" performers such as the following: Filippo d'Aiglié's drawing of Indians and Europeans dancing in a 1650 performance of the ballet *Il Tabacco* in Turin, at the court of Christine, Duchess of Savoy (fig. 8.5); and a painting by an anonymous artist of an elaborately befeathered African in the *Grand Ballet et Comédie des Noces [sic] de Pélée et Thétis* performed at the French court in 1654 (fig. 8.6).²⁸

Because of the gaps in our (or at least my) current knowledge of a mode of work which seems, *pace* Greene, very much like a form of slavery located in theatrical rather than plantation or mining spaces, we encounter, when we look at these European representations of European spectacles featuring non-European performers (as well as Europeans dressed to look like exotic "others"), a vertiginous hall of mirrors that shuttles us, as viewers, back and forth between problems of objectification and (hypothesized or fantasized) subjectivity. Within this eerily postmodern space of simulacra, we can however draw a conceptual link between, and perhaps thereby construct something like a little knowledge about, these depictions of exotic performers on European stages and the image reproduced above, allegedly showing Anne Bracegirdle in the role of an Indian Queen wearing a feather headdress. The white actress (as you can see if you turn back to fig. 8.3) is tended by exotic plumed children who combine characteristics of Amerindians and Africans in a conflation typical of the so-called discourse of primitivism;²⁹ and the detail of the feathers adorning both the actress and her attendants works, I think, to suggest that despite the contrasting heights and colors of the figures depicted here – and the difference in social status signaled by those contrasts – there is nonetheless some ideologically important kinship among these figures. The mode of kinship is paradoxical but intriguing, since it resides in the fact that all of these figures are *not* what they seem. A white Englishwoman is playing an American (red- or "tawny"-skinned) Indian and black African children are playing that Queen's presumably Indian attendants. The significance of theatrical illusion is underscored, I think, by the ornamentation of humans with feathers, "clothes" appropriated, as it were, from creatures of another species. That species was enormously admired, both in American and European cultures: in many of the cultures homogenized by the very terms "Amerindian" and "European," birds were often associated with the divine or superhuman. In this connection, marvellous "grand Perroquet" forming the "coiffure" of the Frenchman playing an "Indian

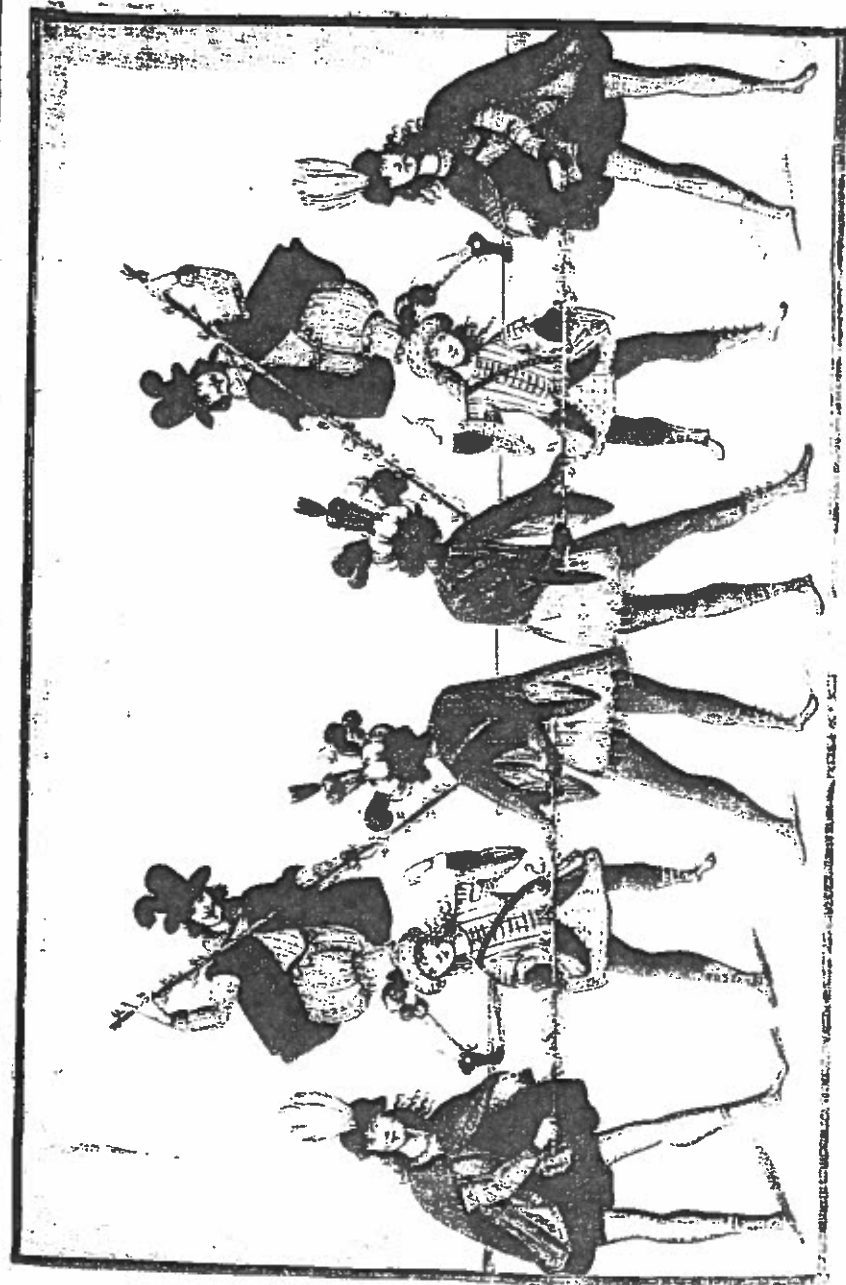


Figure 8.5 Filippo d'Aiglié's drawing of Indians and Europeans dancing in a scene from the ballet *Il Tabacco* performed in 1650 in Turin, at the court of Christine, Duchess of Savoy.



Figure 8.7 Frenchmen playing "Indian drummer and trumpeter" in the "Carousel" festival of Louis XIV, June 1662. Engraving by François Chauveau (Paris, 1670) after a drawing by Charles Perrault.

is worth mentioning that Behn herself was described as an exemplar of a superior "third sex" in a poem by Daniel Kendrick published to praise (and advertise) Behn's own pastoral poem *Lycidus*, which was published in 1688, the very year *Oroonoko* appeared.³³ The poem praising Behn as a member of a "Third Sex" suggests, however, that there are vested interests of an economic kind (a kind that Garber arguably underplays in her book) infusing and definitely limiting the fluid "space of possibility" created by Behn's playful representation of a scene of fantastic mutual

admiration between herself, her black slave (who serves here as a kind of theater manager, providing "entertainment"), and the Native Americans. For in this scene as in the book as a whole, Behn is advertising herself, along with the (regrettably lost) colony and its inhabitants, to metropolitan readers of both sexes and especially to a male sovereign whose gaze she hopes to attract. Her reference to the gift of the feathered headdress serves at once to remind the King and Behn's readers that she is a playwright and imaginatively to substitute a "gift economy" – obtaining between herself and her (desired) patron the King – for the capitalist system of buying and selling commodities in which Behn was in fact operating.³⁴ In 1688, she was out of favor as a playwright and hence unable to garner the "Third Night" receipts upon which she had mainly depended for her livelihood. Her reference to her own hand as a standard for measuring the exotic "flies" that she gave the King suggests, I would argue, that she is not only a woman with a body worth noticing but also a writer whose "hand" both makes and presents books.

In the book named *Oroonoko*, which Behn explicitly and not without signs of guilt offers as a substitute for the narrative *Oroonoko* might himself have told (and which she offers more obliquely, I have argued elsewhere, as a symbolic substitute for his dismembered body and that of the unborn child he kills when he kills the pregnant Imoinda),³⁵ we have a partial representation, partial in both senses of the word, of a cultural system in which actors, white women, Native Americans and Africans of both sexes shared versions of a subject position we might define simply as that of "being on display in and for the market." (Seventeenth-century women writers like Mary Lee Chudleigh and Margaret Cavendish explicitly draw an analogy between the "selling" of women as wives and the selling of men as slaves.)³⁶ Behn's book also shows, however, that this international economic and cultural system allowed literate white women to assume, along with their "display" position, the positions of author, of collector, and of transporter and seller of exotic objects and images. Such positions, usually reserved for white men, were *partially* available to Behn and virtually never open to the non-white subject-objects of her professional woman's gaze.

NOTES

- 1 Montrose has analyzed this paradigm in "The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery," *Representations* 33 (Winter 1991), 1–41; see esp. p. 1. According to this paradigm, both the landscape and the inhabitants of the New World are gendered female while the European explorer is, of course, male – and usually, even from the early phase of the conquest, a male in competition with another male for possession of the ostensibly virgin land.

- In the initial phase of the conquest, the Spanish competed with the Portuguese, appealing to their mutual father the Pope to adjudicate their dispute; and later, the latecoming English competed with the Spanish, in a phase wonderfully exemplified by Sir Walter Raleigh as analyzed by Montrose. Raleigh's language of description in his *Discourse of the Discoverie of Guiana* (1595) draws on the tradition of the blazon of the female body that Nancy Vickers has analyzed in "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981), 265–79. Raleigh uses such metaphorical passages as the famous one about "Guiana" as a "country that hath yet her maidenhead" to "convey a proleptically elegiac sympathy for this unspoiled world at the same time that it arouses excitement at the prospect of despoiling it" (p. 12) and also to create a triangular relationship whereby "a masculine writer shares with his readers the verbal construction observation of a woman or feminized object or matter; in doing so, he creates a masculinized subject position for his readers to occupy and share" (Montrose, "Gender," p. 13).
- 2 For different accounts of Behn's sojourn in Guiana see Angeline Goreau, *Reconstructing Aphra: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn* (New York, 1989), pp. 49–69. Sara Mendelson, *The Mental World of Stuart Women* (Brighton, 1987), 23–35. Campbell hypothesizes a six-year visit whereas Mendelson argues for a two-month stay between January and February 1664. For a discussion of the historical evidence pertaining to Behn's visit see Margaret Ferguson, "News from the New World: Miscegenous Romance in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and *The Widow Ranter*," in David Lee Miller, Sharon O'Dair, and Harold Weber, eds., *The Production of English Renaissance Culture* (Ithaca, 1994), p. 155 n. 7.
 - 3 See, for instance, Goreau, *Reconstructing Aphra*, p. 289.
 - 4 See Brown's important article "The Romance of Empire: *Oroonoko* and the Trade in Slaves," in Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown, eds., *The New Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1987), pp. 40–61.
 - 5 See Behn, *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave*, with an introduction by Lore Metzger (New York, 1973), p. 8. All quotations are from this edition.
 - 6 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1944), quoted in Barbara L. Solow and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *British Capitalism & Caribbean Slavery* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 1.
 - 7 See Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (1975), trans. Tom Conley (New York, 1988), esp. the introduction ("Writings and Histories") and ch. 1 ("Making History: Problems of Method and Problems of Meaning").
 - 8 *The Journals of Christopher Columbus*, trans. Cecil Jane (New York, 1989), p. 194.
 - 9 Citations of *Paradise Lost* are from *Milton's Complete Poetry and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Hughes (New York, 1957).
 - 10 For a brilliant analysis of this ideological binarism in Columbus's writing, see Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (New York, 1986).
 - 11 See Margreta de Grazia's essay in this volume for an analysis of this ideologically charged phrase from *King Lear*.
 - 12 For important discussions of these forerunners of the modern museum see

- Julius von Schollosser, *Die Kunst und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens* (1908; rpt. Braunschweig: Klinkhardt und Biermann, 1978); Jean Céard, ed., *La Curiosité à la Renaissance* (Paris, 1986); Oliver Impey and Arthur Macgregor, eds., *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Oxford, 1985); and Steven Mullaney, "Strange Things, Gross Terms. Curious Customs: The Rehearsal of Cultures in the Late Renaissance," in Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *Representing the English Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 65–89. (Also published as ch. 3, "The Rehearsal of Cultures," of Mullaney's *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* [Chicago, 1988]). See also Jody Greene, "New Historicism and Its New World Discoveries," in *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 4 (Spring 1991), 163–98.
- 13 On the idea of the "marvel," see Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago, 1991).
 - 14 Rosamund Gilder, in *Enter the Actress: The First Women in the Theatre* (1931; rpt. New York, 1960), pp. 167–8, notes that there is no record of Anne Bracegirdle playing the part of Dryden's "Indian Queen" and so surmises either that the Vincent mezzotint engraving is of Anne Marshall (who did play that part) or of Bracegirdle playing in Behn's *The Widow Ranter*. The *Biographical Dictionary of Actors . . . 1600–1800*, vol. II, ed. Philip H. Highfill, Jr., Kalman A. Burnam, Edward A. Langhams et al. (Carbondale, Ill., 1973), unequivocally captions its reproduction of the engraving with the phrase "ANNE BRACEGIRDLE as Semernia" (p. 270); but Stephen Orgel has recently suggested, in a personal communication, that the attribution may be problematic. I shall accept it (as does the Harvard Theatre Collection) until I discover evidence to the contrary.
 - 15 In his *Luxury and Capitalism* (1913; rpt. Ann Arbor, Mich., 1967), Werner Sombart demonstrates that the ideological connection between women's "nature" and luxury persists into the twentieth century. The acquisition of luxuries is driven, he exclaims, by the "influence of the women! Even more the influence of the mistress"; women "invent other allurements to increase the comforts of their living rooms and to entrap men there" (pp. 102–3).
 - 16 As Philip Siegelman remarks in his usefully skeptical introduction to Sombart's *Luxury and Capitalism*, the relation between luxury, asceticism, and capitalist development has been probed by writers from Mandeville through Adam Smith, Marx, Veblen, to Galbraith (p. xxiv), with no consensus in sight. In his *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore, 1977), John Sekora usefully surveys the history of the idea without, however, adding much to the debate about luxury's relation to capitalism either as "cause" (for Sombart, the desire for luxury, which he generally treats as an atemporal "given" of human nature, "gave birth" to capitalism) or as an effect, or – in a more dialectical view – as both.
 - 17 For an incisive discussion of Mun and other early mercantilists, as well as their opponents, see Joyce Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1978). See also Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean* (1970; rpt. New York, 1984), p. 40, on invectives against trade in "useless things."

- 18 Sir William Petyt (?). *Britannia Languens, or a Discourse on Trade* (1680). rpt. in J. R. McCulloh, ed., *Early English Tracts on Commerce* (Cambridge, 1952), p. 421. The passage is cited (along with others illustrating economic writers' anxiety about female luxury and its costs to England) by Louis Landa, "Pope's Belinda, The General Emporie of the World, and the Wondrous Worm," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 70 (Spring 1971), 215-35; see 227-8 for the citations from *Britannia Languens*, which Landa describes as "doubtfully attributed" to Petyt.
- 19 Both the *Weavers' Complaint* and Povey's newspaper essays are cited in Landa, pp. 226-7, notes 18 and 22.
- 20 See Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro*, pp. 164-5 and *passim*, for a discussion of the contradictions in mercantilist ideology and its allowances for metropolitan enterprises to be protected from colonial ones.
- 21 See Greene's "New Historicism," cited above, n. 12.
- 22 See Christian F. Feest's epilogue to his collection *Indians in Europe* (Aachen, 1987), p. 614; my quoted phrases are from Jody Greene's summary of Feest's argument, "New Historicism," 175.
- 23 The picture is discussed in William C. Sturtevant, "First Visual Images of Native America," in Fredi Chiappelli, ed., *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old* (2 vols., Berkeley, 1976), I, pp. 417-54. On Indians as slaves see John Hemming, *Red Gold: The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians, 1500-1760* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978). As Jody Greene remarks ("New Historicism," n. 24), an account of the Aztecs enslaved by Cortés who eventually ended up performing their acrobatic tricks at the court of Pope Clement VII in Rome may be found in Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of Mexico*, trans. Maurice Keatinge (London, 1927), II, pp. 498-504.
- 24 Tzvetan Todorov, whose *The Conquest of America* Greene cites admiringly, has been criticized along just these lines for seeming at times - particularly in his emphasis on and favorable evaluation of European skills of *communication* (literacy) - to justify the conquest as (ultimately) beneficial to the Indians. This critique, which Greene does not cite, seems germane to the work of many Anglo-American scholars currently negotiating the question of their own investment(s) in the topic of early European colonialism. See Deborah Root, "The Imperial Signifier: Todorov and The Conquest of America," *Cultural Critique* 9 (Spring 1988), 197-219.
- 25 In "New Historicism," Greene counters Mullaney's reading of the Rouen entry in "The Rehearsal of Cultures" (cited above, n. 12) by arguing that the Rouen townspeople, funded by local merchants, relied on Brazilian "actors" who may well have been living in Rouen for some time, who may have come to France voluntarily (though there is no clear evidence for this) and who were definitely not regarded by the French as "monstrous" curiosities because the aim of the entry was not to create (as Mullaney argues) a "detailed mise-en scène of Brazilian culture" but rather "a carefully composed representation of the harmonious trading relations between the French and their Tupinamba associates" - relations that the King was threatening to undermine (Greene, 170).

- 26 The contradictory cases are discussed by and cited in Folarin Shyllon, *Black People in Britannia, 1555-1833* (London, 1977), p. 17.
- 27 Williams, *From Columbus to Castro*, p. 207.
- 28 I am indebted to my colleague Claire Farago for initially directing me to these images and to Liesel Nolan for helping me find the locations of the originals. An English example of a performance dramatizing Indians is the masque, with text by George Chapman and sets and costumes by Inigo Jones, presented on 15 February 1613 to celebrate the marriage of Princess Elizabeth and Frederick, Elector Palatine. As Suzanne Boorsch notes, the characters included "a chorus of Virginian priests" who "sing songs to the Sun but are then urged to worship 'our Briton Phoebus,' that is, James I" (Boorsch, "America in Festival Presentations," in Chiappelli, *First Images*, I, p. 512. For a reproduction of the design for one Indian torchbearer, the only remaining design for this masque, see Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong, *Inigo Jones: The Theatre of the Stuart Court* (2 vols., Berkeley and London, 1973), I, p. 256.
- 29 For this conflation see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966), p. 480; and Boorsch, "America in Festival Presentations," pp. 505-6.
- 30 Boorsch discusses the "so-called Indians" (played by French noblemen) in this engraving and remarks on the merging of exotic types effected by the use of a "parrot for a headdress" when the Indian in question is evidently from the East, not from the New World, since the procession of Indians was followed by a brigade of "Americans" led by the Duke of Guise ("America in Festival Presentations," pp. 505-6).
- 31 For a fine discussion of the links Behn draws between blackness and the writer's tool of ink, see Catherine Gallagher, "The Author-Monarch and the Royal Slave: Oroonoko and the Blackness of Representation," ch. 2 of *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820*, (Berkeley, 1994).
- 32 See Garber's *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York, 1992), p. 11.
- 33 For Kendrick's poem see *The Works of Aphra Behn*, ed. Montague Summers (6 vols., 1915; rpt. New York, 1967), VI, pp. 296-8.
- 34 In "Owning Oroonoko: Behn, Southerne, and the Contingencies of Property," *Renaissance Drama*, n.s., 23 (1992), 25-58, Laura J. Rosenthal argues shrewdly that Behn seeks to deny her own implication in the "commodification of discourse" by depicting an idealized "gift economy" in the African and New World settings of *Oroonoko*.
- 35 See Margaret Ferguson's essay, "Transmuting Othello: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," in Marianne Novy, ed., *Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Differences in Women's Revisions of Shakespeare* (Urbana, Ill., 1993), pp. 15-49.
- 36 For these and other instances of the "wife-slave" analogy, see my article "Juggling the Categories of Race, Class and Gender: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 19 (1991), 165 and n. 27; rpt. in Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds., *Women, "Race," Writing* (London, 1994).