Shakespeare Association of America
Annual Meeting 2025
March 19-22, 2025

Angelina Del Balzo
Assistant Professor of English
Utah Valley University
adelbalzo@uvu.edu

"Aphra Behn Writing Racialized Royalty from the Mediterranean to the Americas"

Abstract

Aphra Behn is in some ways the first playwright of Colonial America. Her *Oroonoko* (1688), adapted with raging success to the stage by Thomas Southerne (1695), is one of the first literary depictions of chattel slavery in English. Her colonial Virginia play *The Widdow-Ranter* (1689) dramatizes Bacon's Rebellion features silent Black attendants in one scene but focuses on his love for Queen Semernia. Before these texts is the Black anti-hero Abdelazer, a captive Moor in a play adapted from Thomas Dekker with echoes of Shakespeare's Aaron. This text formed the basis of Edward Young's *The Revenge* (1721), one of Ira Aldridge's signature roles as the first Black actor on the London stage. Behn's three texts feature racialized royalty, the "Royal Slave" of *Oroonoko*, Abdelazer's blood "Royal as the best," and the Indigenous Queen of *The Widdow-Ranter*. The birthright of royalty abuts the ongoing violence against Africans and Indigenous Americans, a visual dissonance perhaps obscured in performance in the metropole. In particular, the contemporary events depicted in her American plays present contradictory images of Indigeneity in the seventeenth century and the possibilities of tribal sovereignty and for the agency of enslaved peoples. This paper will triangulate Behn's depiction of Blackness in *Oroonoko*, *The Widdow-Ranter*, and *Abdelazer*, showing how Mediterranean slavery provides the language and templates for theatrical depictions of settler colonialism and plantation slavery in the Americas.

Bibliography

Beach, Adam R. "Anti-Colonist Discourse, Tragicomedy, and the 'American' Behn." *Comparative Drama* 38, no. 2–3 (2004): 213–34.

MacDonald, Joyce Green. "The Queen's Minion: Sexual Difference, Racial Difference, and Aphra Behn's *Abdelazer*." In *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Mallipeddi, Ramesh. "Spectacle, Spectatorship, Sympathy: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and the English Commercial Empire." In *Spectacular Suffering: Witnessing Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016.

Margaux Delaney
November 5, 2024

SAA 2025 Seminar: Women Writing Transatlantic Slavery
Masking and Unmasking in Mary Wroth's *Urania*

Late in the first part of Mary Wroth's *Urania,* Pamphilia takes off a mask. While out walking, the queen encounters a shepherd who says he can tell whether she is a "maid" by looking at her face; she "puld off a Mask she wore," not mentioned until this moment, and the shepherd identifies her as a virgin. Scholars such as Virginia Mason Vaughn and Ian Smith have linked this kind of mask or vizard, typically made of black velvet, to early modern techniques of racial prosthesis. Reading the black mask against the *Masque of Blackness,* my paper seeks to use Pamphilia's masking and unmasking as a heuristic for the public performance of race, gender, and sexuality in the 1621 *Urania.* The mask is a prosthetic of racial blackness, yet it functions to preserve the whiteness of the skin beneath—a whiteness linked, in the *Urania's* unmasking scene, with a racialized chastity. I will read the unmasking scene together with sonnets from the 1621 *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* to situate Wroth within what I call the "stigma of print," a term I'm appropriating to describe the relationship between early modern English print culture and female sexuality as it is figured by the literal stigma—a shameful mark, especially on skin—of black ink. I will argue that the published *Urania* assumes the stigma of print in order to protect the chaste whiteness to which it gestures beneath. In another strand of inquiry not yet integrated into my argument, but that I hope to begin making sense of in this paper, I want to pursue Wroth's literal investments in the English colonial project and the transatlantic slave trade by looking into the continued appearance of the name of her husband, Robert Wroth, in a list of Virginia Company investors seemingly after his death.

Miles Grier, "Inkface: The Slave Stigma in England's Early Imperial Imagination," in *Scripturalizing the Human: The Written as the Political,* ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Routledge, 2015), 139-220.

Wendy Wall, "Reading for the Blot," in *Reading and Writing in Shakespeare,* ed. David M. Bergeron (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), 131-159.

Mary Wroth, "Like to the Indians" (P25), in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus,* 1621.

Hannah Chambers
Emory University
Shakespeare Association of America 2025
Women Writing Transatlantic Slavery

"It is but a hundred Guineas thrown away":[1] The Economics of Race and Marriage in Susanna Centlivre's *The Busy Body*

Susanna Centlivre's 1709 comedy, *The Busy Body,* was one of the most performed plays written by a woman in the eighteenth century. The plot, which centers the story of Miranda, an heiress who subverts patriarchal tradition by choosing a love match through cunning and legal manipulation, often attracts attention as a proto-feminist example of the agency women can exhibit in the institution of marriage. What has achieved significantly less attention, however, is the fact that this institution within the play is wholly dependent upon England's economic involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Through the exclusive use of Guineas, the coin introduced to England in 1663 from the Royal African Company as a means of bartering enslaved people, the play attempts to redefine patriarchy, while simultaneously crafting white womanhood as the sole means of doing so. In a play so invested in wealth as a means of procuring marriage, the multiple exchanges of the African coin wholly implicate the slave trade in the process of constructing white, upper-class womanhood. This aspect of whiteness in a burgeoning capitalist world is also marked as specifically English, as can be seen through the character of Sir Jealous Traffick, a Spanish ambassador whose anti-English sentiments are constantly mocked throughout. By drawing attention to the racial capitalism inherent in the most famous of Centlivre's works, I argue we can see how the logics of race-making, and more particularly, the construction of white womanhood, are directly tied to England's position as a slave trading entity.

Bibliography

Chakravarty, Urvashi. *Fictions of Consent: Slavery, Servitude, and Free Service in Early Modern England*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022.

Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 106, no. 8, 1993, pp. 1707-1791, https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787.

Morgan, Jennifer. *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*. Duke University Press, 2021.

[1] Susanna Centlivre, "The Busy Body," *The Works of the Celebrated Mrs. Centlivre with a New Account of her Life*, vol. 2, John Pearson, 1872, p. 72.

Hester Pulter's *Unfortunate Florinda*: White Fantasies, Performance Traditions, and Fictions of English Slavery

Sarah-Gray Lesley, University of Chicago

Hester Pulter's manuscript prose romance, *The Unfortunate Florinda* (ca. 1660), is a mess of a text. Folding together histories from the eighth-century Umayyad conquest of Spain and seventeenth-century networks of trade, traffic, and colonization, Pulter creates a problematically hybridized fantasy world wherein racial violence, sexual assault, and slavery serve, first and foremost, as an impetus for adventure. Despite the prevalence of these themes, the infrequently read *Florinda* has not often been treated as an important text about race and rhetorics of enslavement. This paper intervenes in this critical gap by arguing that Pulter's romance is a pastiche of a number of racializing techniques and fictions that accumulated over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on the English stage. Characters, in other words, rehearse techniques for depicting differently raced, abled, classed, or gendered archetypes, and these techniques are repurposed for dramatic effect in scenes wherein people are trafficked, sold, and enslaved. Pulter's conglomerative and inconsistent appropriation of playhouse racial fictions ultimately works to defend English slaveholding practices. Given that Pulter likely never imagined that *Florinda* would be read outside her own family, we might reasonably conclude that the text was written largely in the service of her own enjoyment. With this suggestion in mind, I raise questions about the disturbing role of authorial pleasure in white women's literary engagement with racemaking, transatlantic slavery, and the invention and consolidation of white womanhood as a privileged category.

Bibliography:

Urvashi Chakravarty. *Fictions of Consent: Slavery, Servitude, and Free Service in Early Modern England.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022.

Hester Pulter. *The Unfortunate Florinda*, ed. Alice Eardley. Toronto: Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2014.

Melissa E. Sanchez. "What Were Women Writers?" *Criticism* 63.1 (2021): 63-73.

Ayanna Thompson. "On Protean Acting: Race and Virtuosity." *Renaissance Quarterly* 75.1 (2022): 1127-43.

Kristina Lucenko

Abstract: “I live now more like a Ladie”: Whiteness as Identity in Mary Carleton’s Letter from Port Royal in Jamaica

In this paper I will return to a figure I have written about before: Mary Carleton, also known as “the German princess,” an English woman who gained notoriety in the Restoration for skillfully inventing personas to steal goods from unsuspecting suitors. Carleton emerged in London in 1663 when she successfully defended herself against charges of bigamy brought by her husband John Carleton and his family, and in the process redrew racial boundaries to make room for a white privilege legitimized by an ideology of merit as opposed to one of rank and heredity. Her trial occasioned dozens of pamphlets that debated whether Mary performed a wealthy German gentlewoman to defraud men or whether John and his family had hatched a scheme to trick her into marriage and secure her wealth. Rather than look at the pamphlets circulating about Mary Carleton and her trial in 1663, in this paper I will focus on the pamphlets produced closer to her 1673 execution through which she loses the privileges of white womanhood and its accompanying protections of innocence and goodness. I will focus on Carleton’s “News from Jamaica in a letter from Port Royal” (1671), in which she ironizes her transportation there as a convicted criminal by emphasizing how she was treated with “civility” in a colonial place known for harsh labor conditions and violent treatment of both enslaved Africans and white indentured servants. I explore Carleton attempts to leverage her racial and gender identity at a moment in which the ideological construction of white womanhood offers real and material advantages. In a plantation colony like Jamaica and at a time when English laws are codifying hereditary racial slavery, Carleton reproduces and practices, in an ad hoc manner, behavior that allows her to pursue her explicit goal of preferential treatment and, more broadly, self-possession.

Three texts for our collective bibliography

David Sterling Brown, *Shakespeare’s White Others.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2023.

Urvashi Chakravary, “Slavery and White Womanhood in Early Modern England,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 75.4 (2002): 1144-1179.

Shannon Sullivan, *White Privilege.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.

Whitney Sperrazza
Texas A&M University
SAA 2025 | Women Writing Transatlantic Slavery

Aphra Behn's "fair Queen of Night": Touching on Imoinda in *Oroonoko*

This paper reads Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko, or, the Royal Slave* (1688) as a story about who touches Imoinda and the effects those touches have on where her body is placed. Building on postcolonial, critical race, and feminist work that has excavated the different impulses coursing through Behn's text, I linger in the fraught intersection between romance and travelogue genres that structure this "history of the royal slave." By writing both a romance and a purported "eye-witness" account of New World travel, Behn collapses the intimate, feeling, desire-centric tropes of the romance with the colonial imperatives of taking, touching, and controlling bodies. Through the interplay between these genres and their relation to touch (and touching), *Oroonoko* functions as a colonial technology, with Behn actively participating in the period's ongoing theorization of (and propaganda for) colonial encounters. Imoinda is at the center of this theorization as the text's central figure of desire. She is valued; she is ornament; she is resource. And, as a result, her body (and control over it) becomes a metonymic analogy for the colony of Surinam. With Imoinda as its focus, this paper tracks Behn's complicity in the early English colonial project as a function of form.

Bibliography

Brown, Laura. "The Romance of Empire: *Oroonoko* and the Trade in Slaves." In *The Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-century English Literature*. Cornell UP, 1993. 23–63.

Hendricks, Margo, and Patricia Parker, eds. *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period*. Routledge, 1994.

Pender, Patricia. "Competing Conceptions: Rhetorics of Representation in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*. *Women's Writing* 8.3 (2001): 457–72.