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# The Courtier and the Courteous:

Shifts in Virtue in *Oroonoko* and *Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*

[ JENNIFER BOLEK ]

The exploration of the meaning of virtue was a popular theme across the history of English literature. From the late 1600s to the late 1700s, a shift in the meaning of virtue occurred, and was reflected in English literature. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave* emphasized the connection between virtue and European perceptions of royalty and strength, whereas James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, highlighted virtue as a demonstration of sociability, integrity, and maintenance of public reputation. Behn's *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave* presented the story of Oroonoko, an African prince who is tricked by the captain of a ship and sold into slavery. Behn portrayed virtue through explorations of royalty, strength, and respect for royalty in *Oroonoko*. Despite being treated better than other slaves because of his nobility Oroonoko was captured and killed following an attempted escape but managed to maintain his dignity throughout the experience. Oroonoko's noble characteristics also aligned with Baldassare Castiglione's perceptions of an ideal European man as described in *The Book of the Courtier*, emphasizing Behn's idealization of European traits. In her article "Royalism and Honor in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," Anita Pacheco examined the impact of Oroonoko's status as royalty—and his European traits—on his treatment as a slave and the impact of his status on readers' perceptions of other characters. A shift to a focus on social aspects as a form of virtue occurred later in the century, as presented through Boswell's account of Samuel Johnson's life. In Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, Boswell presented a biography of English author Samuel Johnson that highlighted Johnson's social prowess and manners rather than physical strength and skill. The differences between portrayals of virtue in *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave* and *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* demonstrate how perceptions of virtue shifted over the course of the century.

Though Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko: or the Royal Slave* is sometimes interpreted as an anti-slavery text due to its "depiction of noble African slaves,"<sup>1</sup> the book has a more central focus on royalty and the treatment of royals. Virtuous traits include, in part, traits which signify Oroonoko's status as a member of royalty. For example, Oroonoko's education and intelligence was a virtue, as it distinguished him from other slaves and was a mark of his royal lineage. Oroonoko spoke French, English, and Spanish, and was taught "morals, language, and science,"<sup>2</sup> which interested both the narrator and Trefry. Oroonoko seemed to have received the education of a royal European man, which earned him the respect of his captors.

As a mark of royalty, Oroonoko's knowledge and education also add to the portrayal of further European virtues in *Oroonoko*. The Europeanization of Oroonoko creates the possibility of gaining sympathy from the readers, as "This double-edged strategy, which endows the African with human stature while simultaneously assuming that human stature is by definition European, makes it possible for a text to establish identification with the 'Other' while at the same time remaining complacently Eurocentric."<sup>3</sup> This Eurocentrism shapes virtue throughout *Oroonoko*, as the traits that distinguish him as noble and admirable are distinctly European. Eurocentrism is also emphasized through Oroonoko's physical appearance, as he had a nose that was "rising and Roman instead of African and flat," and a mouth that was "the finest shape that could be seen, far from those great turned lips which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes."<sup>4</sup> In fact, the narrator states that he was the most beautiful thing in nature in all aspects but the color of his skin.<sup>5</sup> Behn's emphasis of Oroonoko's European characteristics is further evidence that virtue in *Oroonoko* revolved around European values.

In addition to European physicality, Oroonoko shared virtues with Baldassare Castiglione's ideal courtier, further demonstrating Behn's emphasis on traditionally European virtue. For example, Castiglione idealized warrior characteristics.<sup>6</sup> Oroonoko was clearly a strong warrior, as after learning that Imoinda had supposedly died, he charged into battle and "flew into the thickest of those that were pursuing his men, and being animated with despair, he fought as if he came on purpose to die, and did

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1 Anita Pacheco, "Royalism and Honor in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 34 (1994): 492.

2 Aphra Behn, "Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2012), 2317.

3 Pacheco, 492.

4 Behn, 2317.

5 Ibid.

6 Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), 29-31.

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such things as will not be believed that human strength could perform."<sup>7</sup> It is evident that Oroonoko possessed the warrior virtues Castiglione valued because he battled to defend his people. Castiglione stated that courtiers must not go to battle "except when honour demands it,"<sup>8</sup> which parallels Oroonoko's actions. Oroonoko resorted to revolt and violence only when the honor of his people and his wife were at stake. For example, Oroonoko organized a slave revolt to restore the honor of his people and killed Imoinda honorably rather than leaving her to be raped and killed by captors.<sup>9</sup> When Oroonoko was on the slave ship, he "would engage his honor to behave himself in all friendly order and manner"<sup>10</sup> instead of fighting the captain for better treatment. By emphasizing the virtues of discipline and maintaining honor through battle, Behn portrayed Oroonoko in a manner that aligned him with the European virtue of honorable bravery.

Behn's depiction of Oroonoko also matches Castiglione's description of the courtier in terms of hobbies and strength. Castiglione indicated that activities such as hunting and sports could increase the courtier's ability to be a successful warrior.<sup>11</sup> Oroonoko was renowned for his hunting skills, having killed tigers and catching an electric eel despite it shocking him through the fishing rod.<sup>12</sup> Oroonoko's hunting skills demonstrated that he was the kind of well-rounded individual that Castiglione valued. Additionally, being able to resist the pain of the electric eel shock benefitted Oroonoko as a warrior and also aided him in preserving his honor. In the final scene, Oroonoko smoked a pipe as the executioner cut off his genitals, ears, nose, and arms.<sup>13</sup> This defiance of his captors indicated his efforts to die an honorable death despite being killed in a dishonorable manner. Oroonoko's courtier-esque virtues of strength and honor allowed him to preserve his dignity through his last moments and emphasized his bravery.

Furthermore, Behn's presentation of Oroonoko emphasized social aspects, such as conversational skills, as important virtues. This also parallels Castiglione's description of the ideal courtier's social behavior.<sup>14</sup> Behn emphasized the power of Oroonoko's communication in several instances throughout the text. On the slave ship, Oroonoko verbally convinced the captain of his honesty, leading the captain to unchain him. Oroonoko also convinced the other slaves to remain chained and end their hunger strike.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, on the way back to the plantation, Trefry

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7 Behn, 2330.

8 Castiglione, 30.

9 Behn, 2349-50.

10 Ibid, 2333.

11 Castiglione, 29-31.

12 Behn, 2342-4.

13 Ibid, 2358.

14 Castiglione, 38.

15 Behn, 2333-4.

entertained Oroonoko through “art and discourse.”<sup>16</sup> Oroonoko’s convincing speech and appreciation of language allowed him to converse with his captors, gain authority amongst the slaves, and preserve his dignity. The virtue of refined social skills was vital to Oroonoko’s early time as a slave because he earned respect by distinguishing himself as an authority figure amongst the slaves and establishing a bond with some of his captors. Behn insinuated that Oroonoko’s superior social skills allowed him to experience better treatment than the rest of the slaves until his death.

Lastly, the virtues emphasized in *Oroonoko* emphasize Aphra Behn’s value of royalty. Anita Pacheco examined the royalism present in *Oroonoko*, stating, “...individual value is associated with birth, virtue with an inherited rank which is conceived of as ‘natural.’”<sup>17</sup> It is evident that Behn’s portrayals of various forms of virtue were tied in with her value of European royalty. Castiglione’s views on the ideal courtier supplement Pacheco’s claim as well. Castiglione valued noble birth as a virtue of the courtier.<sup>18</sup> This demonstrates that Aphra Behn’s portrayal of virtue was rooted in traditional views of royalty, as reflected in Oroonoko’s royal status as a distinguishing factor. This is evident not only through Oroonoko’s character, but the portrayal of those who treat him with respect compared to those who dishonor him. Pacheco described that Behn’s “royalist discourse essentially portrays royal power as a natural law, suffused with divine purpose.”<sup>19</sup> In *Oroonoko*, those who respected this “natural law” were portrayed as likeable characters, such as Trefry, who immediately recognized Oroonoko’s superiority and became his best friend and looked out for his wellbeing.<sup>20</sup> However, characters who did not respect Oroonoko’s status were portrayed as evil. For instance, Byam’s humiliating deceit of Oroonoko illustrates Pacheco’s claim that “Evil men may violate [the natural order of royalty] but they cannot, at least at this stage in the narrative destroy it.”<sup>21</sup> It is clear from Aphra Behn’s portrayal of Oroonoko as a figure similar to Castiglione’s courtier and her depiction of others’ interactions with him that the virtues she promoted within the story reflected royalist ideals, as explored by Anita Pacheco.

In the late 1700s, literature portrayed a shift in virtue away from the heroism and royal characteristics. Virtue no longer revolved around Castiglione’s ideal courtier, aside from the importance of conversation. Instead, virtue revolved around social interactions, emphasizing the maintenance of relationships and a dignified public reputation, as evidenced in James Boswell’s *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* Boswell

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16 Ibid, 2335.

17 Pacheco, 494.

18 Castiglione, 22.

19 Pacheco, 495.

20 Behn, 2335-51.

21 Pacheco, 495.

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discussed Johnson's Oxford education and religion, but Johnson's social situations were highlighted in his letters and Boswell's own experiences with Johnson and his contemporaries. The letters and anecdotes Boswell included demonstrated Johnson's eloquence and manners, both of which created a respectable public image which Johnson sought to maintain.

The virtues of dignity and integrity were exemplified in Boswell's discussion about Samuel Johnson's letter to Lord Chesterfield. Boswell explained how Chesterfield had offended Johnson past the point of forgiveness by being an unhelpful patron and by forcing Johnson to wait as he met with the poet Cibber, who was the object of ridicule. Boswell stated, "Johnson was so violently provoked when he found for whom he had been so long excluded, that he went away in a passion and never would return."<sup>22</sup> When Chesterfield attempted to remedy the situation, Johnson found no value in Chesterfield's words and wrote him a letter in which he described his displeasure in how he had been treated. Johnson described feeling neglected by Chesterfield, explaining, "Seven years, my Lord, have now passed since I waited in your outward rooms...without one act of assistance, one word of encouragement, or one smile of favor."<sup>23</sup> Though Johnson's words to Chesterfield were quite critical, he maintained a tone of dignity throughout the letter, eloquently expressing his disappointment and frustration rather than using unkindness and threats to express his anger. Johnson's written interaction with Chesterfield demonstrated the virtue of maintaining a dignified reputation because he avoided insults or other forms of his offense in his letter and addressed Chesterfield's behavior instead of allowing Chesterfield to get away with his displeasing actions. By writing to Chesterfield, Johnson respectfully defended himself against what he believed to be unfair treatment, simultaneously maintaining integrity and ensuring that his reputation remained intact.

Boswell also explored virtue as a combination of integrity and sociability through the inclusion of a letter from Johnson to James Macpherson. Macpherson had written a rude letter to Johnson, who responded by stating that he would fight back if he were to be attacked and that Macpherson's skills were "not formidable."<sup>24</sup> He ended the letter by saying "You may print this if you will."<sup>25</sup> This letter was a further example of Johnson's maintenance of integrity. Though Johnson stated that he would fight, his condition that he would fight only if attacked demonstrated his desire to appear morally superior to Macpherson. Like in his letter to Chesterfield, Johnson did not use violence as a threat and

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22 James Boswell, "The Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), 2969.

23 Ibid, 2970-1.

24 Ibid, 2980.

25 Ibid.

remained civil in the face of conflict. In contrast to Behn's portrayal of virtue as demonstrations of warrior-like bravery, Boswell's portrayal of virtue involved written confrontation and maintenance of reputation. Integrity was emphasized as a virtue, as Johnson used it to prove his reputation as a respectable man, should the recipient of the letter choose to publish it. Johnson did not use language that could be deemed threatening or rude, instead choosing to address his dissatisfaction in a professional manner. Additionally, by Macpherson, the permission to publish the letter, Johnson enforces his public image. Boswell stated, "[Johnson] feared death, but he feared nothing else"<sup>26</sup> in response to the idea that Macpherson believed that Johnson could be intimidated. This demonstrated that Johnson intended to ensure that no one would believe he could be easily intimidated.

The virtue of reputation maintenance was also evident in Boswell's description of Johnson's concerns regarding being mimicked onstage. When Johnson heard that he was to be mimicked for throwing someone out of a chair, he made it clear that he did not wish to be ridiculed.<sup>27</sup> It is evident that Johnson wanted to uphold a professional reputation, and did not want to be portrayed in an unbecoming manner. Once again, Johnson demonstrated the virtue of having a respectable public image. Like Aphra Behn, Boswell considered honor and dignity to be virtuous traits, but Boswell portrayed these traits through social interactions. Johnson's physical response to someone taking his chair reflected Behn's portrayal of strength as a virtue, but his desire to avoid mockery after this event emphasized the virtue of having a respectable public image. Johnson also expressed a desire to avoid mockery when people laughed at his use of the phrase "a bottom of good sense."<sup>28</sup> His frustration at the laughter of others emphasized that Johnson's pride and image were important virtues.

Additionally, sociability was portrayed as virtuous in Boswell's account of Johnson's life. Johnson made efforts to interact with many individuals, including those who did not share his views. For instance, Johnson did not think highly of Jack Wilkes, to the point where his friend Edward Dilly made it a point to keep them separated at dinner. Boswell inquired as to whether Johnson would dine with Wilkes, and Johnson responded, "...it is treating me strangely to talk to me as if I could not meet with any company whatever, occasionally."<sup>29</sup> Clearly, Johnson prided himself in his social skills, and he demonstrated this at the dinner party by making agreeable small talk with everyone and finding common ground with Wilkes while discussing their mutual dislike of Scotland.<sup>30</sup> Johnson's social skills were

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26 Ibid.

27 Ibid, 2981.

28 Ibid, 2987.

29 Ibid, 2982.

30 Ibid, 2984-6.

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perceived as virtuous because they allowed him to demonstrate his ability to adapt to various social situations and to be cordial and polite, even to those he did not care for. Once again, Johnson exemplified dignity and social grace because instead of instigating an argument with Wilkes, he remained friendly despite his readily admitted dislike for the man. Boswell portrayed virtue in a manner that emphasized the ability to socialize effectively with all people, as well as the ability to have a dignified presence in all social situations, whether written or in person.

The meaning of virtue shifted dramatically over the course of English literature. In *Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave*, Behn emphasized European royalist views, as examined by Anita Pacheco. These views led to virtue focusing around traits similar to Baldassare Castiglione's expectations for the ideal courtier, such as warrior prowess, strength, and a royal background. Behn personified these characteristics in the character Oroonoko, portraying him in alignment with European royalty in terms of education and a diverse skillset. In contrast, James Boswell emphasized sociability, integrity, and the maintenance of a dignified reputation as virtuous traits in *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* Boswell's description of Johnson's life mostly strayed from Castiglione's ideals and served to exemplify new ideals. Boswell explored virtue through the inclusion of letters from Johnson, as well as accounts of Johnson's social interactions. This shift in the meaning of virtue indicates a change in societal values. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* placed value in physical power, whereas James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* focused on the power of eloquence and social grace.