CHAPTER 3

“Between the saints and the rebels”¹

*Imoinda and the Resurrection of the Black African Heroine*

> Heroick Imoinda; who, grown big as she was . . . having a Bow, and a Quiver full of poysond Arrows, which she manag’d with such dexterity, that she wounded several, and shot the Governor into the Shoulder; of which Wound he had like to have Dy’d. . . .

—Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko*, 55²

APHRA BEHN must have been well aware that she was establishing a rather unusual prototype for the ideal African heroine when she created “*Heroick Imoinda*.” In particular, the startling description of this “big” black woman using a poisonous weapon to ward off the rapidly advancing colonial militia in Surinam brought an original display of bravery, fortitude, and heroism to Restoration literature that had no precedent in the representations of African women from romances and dramas of the past.³ As if to confirm her new heroine’s importance, Behn hopes that the “Glorious Name” of “the Brave, the Beautiful, and the Constant *Imoinda*” can “survive to All ages” (65)—the capitalized list of qualities that precede Imoinda’s “Glorious Name” enunciating reasons why this atypical black African woman should be established within the pantheon of British literature’s feminine ideals.

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3. For a brief overview of the types of African female characters who appeared in romances and masques prior to 1688, see Lynda Boose’s “The Getting of a Lawful Race.”
But Behn could not have known how far the task of popularizing this ideal African woman’s name and character would stray outside “the Reputation of [her own] Pen” (65). The eighteenth century’s male dramatists, theater owners, critics, commentators as well as the actresses who, collectively, kept the name ‘Imoinda’ prominent in the public eye by altering the Oroonoko story, capturing Imoinda’s essence onstage, or discussing her virtues in their writing can justly lay claim to dispersing and popularizing Imoinda’s reputation far wider than Behn’s prose fiction could have done on its own. However, this popular Imoinda was not circulated in the way that Behn had originally imagined. It is Behn, alone, who appears to write with an explicit interest in promoting a black African woman as a central heroic fixture in British literature, an interest that most of the century’s dramatists and prose fiction writers did not share.¹

The black Imoinda’s ability to “survive to All ages” is, certainly, a primary source of inspiration for this book and its quest to pursue, through the motif of “Imoinda’s shade,” the visibility, viability, and ascendancy of this black heroine’s influence as an imaginative concept in the constructions of African heroines who appear in British literature well beyond 1688. However, so far, I have shown that despite an anonymous author’s attempt to privilege the spirit of the African Imoinda and advance a more aggressive antislavery stance in the 1760 anonymous version of Oroonoko, a prominent writer could also consciously resist attempts to render a contemporary black African heroine within “Imoinda’s shade.” In the previous chapter, I argued that one of Maria Edgeworth’s strategies for promoting amelioration in The Grateful Negro relied on her intertextual knowledge of Imoinda as the representation of the ideal black African heroine and Clara’s failure to measure up to this ideal. Edgeworth’s deliberate acts of what I call ‘creative defamation’ toward Clara are an authorial attempt to undermine Clara’s relationship with Caesar, thereby establishing it as a less idealized version of the iconic African romance between Oroonoko and Imoinda, and thus, a less attractive and less important contrast to the fraternal relationship between Caesar and Mr. Edwards—a coupling that Edgeworth privileges as an idealized romance about the benefits of ameliorating slavery in the colonies. Because The Grateful Negro justifies its conservative, proslavery, reformist agenda by establishing a distance between the idealized and the common African woman, it is logical to turn, once again, to Behn’s heroine for cues to understanding the other side of this equation: how did other popular

¹ Behn’s particular interest in “big” black women appears again in her posthumously published prose fiction The Adventure of the Black Lady (1697). See the collection All the histories and novels written by the late ingenious Mrs. Behn in one entire volume (London: R. Wellington, 1700) for this short novel and Chapter Five of this book for a discussion of this text.
late-eighteenth-century writers establish connections between idealized and common African women in ways that promoted far more aggressive and progressive positions against slavery than are taken in either The Grateful Negro or the anonymous Oroonoko? Or, to put it another way, what texts resurrect the spirit of the black African Imoinda, and how are the fictional women portrayed in them challenging the soft, strategic voice of paternal tyranny and the appeal of its ameliorative call?

In this chapter, I focus on two texts and authors that provide answers to these questions by utilizing a familiar strategy: altering and reinterpreting Oroonoko for a contemporary audience. I argue that the diachronic references to rebellion and sainthood, maternalism and matrimony that are present in Behn’s representation of Imoinda provide a template for understanding Ada, the African wife from August von Kotzebue’s drama The Negro Slaves (1796), and Amri the widowed mother in William Earle’s novel Obi; or, The History of Three Fingered Jack (1800). By embodying Imoinda’s maternal and matrimonial qualities as well her reputations as a saint and a rebel, these fictional African women do not merely resurrect Imoinda’s spirit; they are also involved in their own pivotal battles with paternal tyrants in Jamaica. It is during these moments of confrontation that Kotzebue’s and Earle’s texts are seen forcefully rejecting the conservative approach to antislavery depicted in proslavery texts such as the 1760 altered Oroonoko and The Grateful Negro.

Speaking of the initial stages of antislavery history, the contemporary historian Gelen Matthews notes that

The British antislavery movement was marked by four recognizable phases. The first began around 1783, when the initial attacks against the servile regime were heard in Britain, and included the period from 1787–1807, which concentrated on the abolition of the slave trade . . . abolitionists fought the first leg of the campaign without being too seriously concerned about rebellious slaves.5

*The Negro Slaves* and *Obi* were both published within Matthews’s first phase of the British antislavery movement. Yet each author uses Imoinda and her confrontation with tyranny as a template from which he presents his own fictional representation of a common black African heroine and establishes her at the forefront of proposing solutions to the problem of slavery in the shape of immigration and gynecological rebellion that go far beyond the mere “abolition of the slave trade” that Matthews’s first wave of abolitionists sought.

However, each text’s schizophrenic ending undermines these two realistic and radical interventions into the discourse of antislavery activism. At once sentimentally Oroonoko-esque and unequivocally emancipatory, the climaxes of *The Negro Slaves* and *Obi* reveal an authorial hesitancy about completely casting off the long-held influence of Behn and Southerne to promote the idea of complete emancipation. This means that, as progressive as Kotzebue’s and Earle’s heroines are when resurrected in “Imoinda’s shade,” the texts that house them are neither pliable nor assertive enough to imagine their radical antislavery agendas as actual lived realities for real black African women.

THE RIGHTS OF MAN discourse emerging from the French Revolution and championed by radicals such as Thomas Paine offered black and white activists in the eighteenth century accessible language to advance their cases against various forms of inequality. Through reason, sentimentality and bombast in speeches, literature, pamphlets, narratives, and the like, black men and white women such as Ottobah Cugoano, Olaudah Equiano, Mary Hays, and Mary Wollstonecraft used Paine’s discourse to challenge contemporary paternalist opinions about, and approaches to, the rights of blacks and women. However, black women are never singled out as active contributors to this kind of political agitation because of the absence of substantive source material written by them from the period that reveals how they politicized their own particular experience of slavery, gender, and race. Important stories of women such as the Hart sisters do not contain as much political insight as critics would like, and the first-known British slave narrative written by a woman does not appear until 1831.6

While eighteenth-century first-person narratives by black women may be lost or merely undiscovered, Kotzebue’s and Earle’s texts provide an opportunity to observe the political agitations that fictional black African women are generating in the literature published at this time. In the field of antislavery literature, these fictional representations are as important as first-person narratives because the effect they are designed to have on the national psyche is no less profound. While white female and black male activists are talking and writing about freedom and equality in speeches and published texts, Kotzebue’s and Earle’s fictional black women are also depicted as aggressively using their bodies to fight for both ideals in their battles with paternalists, and until other first-person African women’s narratives surface, these fictional black female bodies can speak to their concerns. They are not created

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in a vacuum, however. I contend that Kotzebue and Earle are actively resurrecting two impressions about Behn’s “Heroick Imoinda” that are gleaned by examining the epigram I include at the beginning of this chapter, specifically Behn’s comments about Imoinda’s disposition, marital status, martial spirit, and, in particular, the growth of her body.

Imoinda’s advanced pregnancy while engaged in battle is, certainly, one of the epigram’s most striking details. Behn draws attention to her heroine’s “big,” presumably cumbersome, state that, to the narrator’s evident amazement, does not impede the “dexterity” of her handling of “a Bow, and a Quiver full of poysond Arrows.” With equal amazement, however, one might ask where this “dexterity” of hand came from? The African section of Behn’s novella makes no mention that Imoinda knew anything about archery much less how to handle “a Bow, and a Quiver full of poysond Arrows” with “dexterity.” Yet the fact that Imoinda’s father was an African “General” leads to the assumption that her toxophilite “dexterity” was not a random trait: it was bestowed, most likely, by diligent paternal instruction. Connections between the martial behavior of this father and daughter become even more deliberate once Behn indicates that the General “was kill’d with an Arrow in his Eye, which the Prince Oroonoko . . . very narrowly avoided; nor had he, if the General, who saw the Arrow shot, and perceiv-ing it aim’d at the Prince, had not bow’d his Head between, on purpose to receive it in his own Body, rather than it shou’d touch that of the Prince, and so saved him” (12). The General uses his body as a defensive weapon—a human shield—that not only screens Oroonoko from certain death but also sets in motion Oroonoko’s future visit to the General’s house, where he sees Imoinda for the first time, and where she becomes an alluring, offensive weapon, putting “on all her Additions to Beauty . . . for nothing more than so glorious a Conquest” (15) of becoming Oroonoko’s wife. As stout human shield and alluring weapon, this African father and daughter are the martial tools that work in tandem, marshalling Oroonoko to his matrimonial fate.

In the complete absence of any authorial interest in her maternal line, Imoinda’s “dexterity” at archery suggests that she has inherited her father’s martial spirit, and her heroism is confirmed when Behn describes her using a bow and poisoned arrows to wound and almost kill the Deputy Governor. By deploying these weapons against Surinam’s leading paternalist figure, Imoinda continues the legacy work her father established on the African battlefield; like him, she demonstrates her commitment to protecting noble African masculinity of the present (Oroonoko), and the future (the possibly male heir she carries). But on the Surinamese battlefield she might even be said to exceed her father’s martial efforts by defending African masculinity, not through the self-sacrifice of suicide, but through outright physical rebel-
lion against the state and the paternalist figure that deny the legitimacy of her marriage to Oroonoko. Success in the form of the Deputy Governor’s death would have essentially destabilized the power structure in Surinam, thereby securing for this rebellious woman an opportunity to be with her husband forever.

Rebelling against the state in order to secure her marriage to Oroonoko was not Imoinda’s original modus operandi, however. In Africa and during her early days in Surinam, particular emanations from her body—“the strength of her Charms,” “the sweetness of her Words and Behaviour,” her disarming “Modesty and Weeping”—in all, the softer aspects of Imoinda’s feminine wiles, are the things that the “beautiful Black Venus” uses as weapons in her dexterous attempts to either dominate, resist, or subdue paternalist figures such as the Coramantien King and the European Trefry, and hence, control the terms by which she is able to preserve herself inviolate for Oroonoko. In this, she has some success. When Imoinda arrives in Surinam, her soft weapons disarm Trefry, thereby allowing for her unsullied reunion with Oroonoko and a “Celebration of [a] Wedding” in which “Caesar took Clemene” for his Wife, to the general Joy of all People” (40). Before long, Imoinda “began to shew she was with Child” (51), and it is this new development to her body that adds another layer to her role as a rebellious wife.

To the colonial paternalists, Oroonoko—the hero that Srinivas Aravamudan has identified as little more than a petted possession—is far less valuable than his wife. They are prepared to mercilessly whip and ultimately kill him for inciting rebellion, but they “carry’d her down to Parham, and shut her up; which was not in kindness to her, but for fear she shou’d Dye with the Sight [of a whipped Oroonoko], or Miscarry; and then they shou’d lose a young Slave, and perhaps the Mother” (57). Imoinda is fully aware of her value on the plantation. Once she “began to shew she was with Child . . . [she] believ’d, if it were so hard to gain the Liberty of Two, ’twou’d be more difficult to get that for Three” (51). Her emphasis on the compounding difficulty of gaining freedom with a baby imminent displays her awareness of the fact that each time she begins to “shew,” the more the stock of her body rises as a source of additional revenue for the master, and the less inclined he will be to emancipate her, Oroonoko, and their expanding brood. ‘Shewing’ is, thus, not only a mark of the urgency of reestablishing her former rank, it is also the starkest of stark reminders that future Africans will lose control over the disposal of their bodies in the face of absolute colonial authority.

7. “Clemene” is Imoinda’s colonial name. See Chapter Two (88, n. 44).
8. Tropicopolitans, 29–70.
9. Children born under slavery always took the social role of the mother.
Therefore, when Imoinda attacks the Deputy Governor in Surinam, Behn implies that this battle is not only a critical opportunity for the black African rebel-wife to fight for the legitimation of her marriage; her pregnant body also stands as an emblem for the two meanings of motherhood that Adrienne Rich distinguishes in *Of Woman Born*: “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control.”

Either this African mother-to-be wins the battle, thereby ensuring that her future African offspring regain complete control over the disposals of their bodies, or she loses, consigning them to a future of perpetual enslavement under colonial male control. By using an African woman’s martial and pregnant body as an emblem for the future of African slavery and freedom in the British Empire, the “big” Imoinda stands as an aggressive maternal alternative to the proslavery paternalism privileged in *The Grateful Negro*. Imoinda rises above her soft role as the “beautiful Black Venus” in Africa to become the embodiment of this bigger maternal cause in Surinam when Behn says that her heroine does “nothing but Sigh and Weep for the Captivity of her Lord, her Self, and the Infant yet Unborn” (51). Here, Behn elevates one of Imoinda’s bodily emanations into a resonant pseudoreligious symbol. Imoinda’s “Sigh” is venerated and presented in a markedly different way from that of Trefry, who “had done nothing but Sigh for her ever since she came [to Surinam]” (38). While his sigh is, undoubtedly, due to some combination of passion and frustrated lust, hers expresses anxiety about the future freedom of a particularly resonant whole composed of herself as wife and mother, Oroonoko as “Lord,” and the (presumably male) “Infant” offspring—a royal, African, familial trinity. Imoinda’s “Sigh” is an African expression of the Judeo-Christian Holy Spirit, an ethereal evocation of future concern for the spirit of freedom denied to this royal African father and future infant. By evoking it, Behn transforms her heroine’s bodily quest for freedom into a pseudoreligious symbol that privileges the liberation, instead of the enslavement, of these exceptional living gods who so resemble “Mars” and “Venus,” and establishes Imoinda as a matron (rather than patron) saint of freedom for future Africans.

This preliminary discussion suggests that Behn’s abolitionism, traditionally read as ambiguous because she withholds her own opinion of Oroonoko’s enslavement, is more definitive when explored through Imoinda. But primarily, I am claiming that Imoinda’s aggressive confrontation with the Deputy Governor establishes her, diachronically, as a rebel-wife willing to kill and be killed to secure the freedom to live with her ideal husband, as

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well as a saint-mother martyred for valiantly trying to secure freedom for future Africans.\footnote{Southern constructs his Imoinda with some knowledge of these factors in mind. For instance, he costumes his African heroine with a bow and quiver, indicating her desire to fend off, and rebel against, the state. However, the fact that we never see her onstage with a “big” pregnant body (as demonstrated by the frontispieces of actresses who performed the role) or in a scene in which she is directly attacking the Deputy Governor ensure that this dramatic white Imoinda is far less recognizable as the aggressive composite of the rebel-wife/saint-mother that Behn originally intended.} This composite image of the “big” black African woman attacking British-colonial paternalism is an important moment from Behn’s \textit{Oroonoko} not only because it shows the fictional African woman rather than the African man at the forefront of overthrowing tyranny and rejecting any benevolent claims colonial authorities might make about ameliorating slavery, but also because it presents her body as most actively involved in the African’s fight for an imagined future without slavery. This image is replicated in the battles against Creole tyrants that later fictional black African heroines of “Imoinda’s shade” engage in.

\textbf{Although August} von Kotzebue achieved acclaim in Britain for plays such as \textit{The East Indian} (1789, 1796 English translation) and \textit{Lover’s Vows} (1780, 1798 English translation), \textit{The Negro Slaves} was, actually, his first work anonymously translated into English in 1796, and one of a dozen of his plays that were never performed for English audiences.\footnote{See L. F. Thompson’s \textit{Kotzebue: A Survey of his Progress in France, & England, Preceded by a Consideration of the Critical Attitude to him in Germany} (Paris: Librarie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1928), 57–60, for a list of Kotzebue’s plays that were either performed and/or published in England. In his “survey,” Thompson dismisses \textit{The Negro Slaves}’ importance in building Kotzebue’s reputation in England and affords the text only a passing mention. My approach is more in line with that of W. Sellier (\textit{Kotzbue in England} [Leipzig, 1901]), who, Thompson writes, “is of opinion that this play was the foundation of Kotzebue’s fame” (60). As I will show, despite never being performed, \textit{The Negro Slaves} publicly influenced some prominent British writers in their own literary works. For more on Kotzebue’s other work published during this time and contemporary considerations of his work, see “August von Kotzebue and Polynesia” in George Steinmetz’s \textit{The Devil’s Handwriting} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 272–78.} Its nonperformance is, itself, a revealing fact and may be attributed to its tone. At a time in which antislavery sentiment in new dramas appears to have been largely buried in comedies and farces\footnote{For instance, see Colman’s Inkle and Yarico, McClaren’s \textit{The Negro Slaves}, Bickerstaff’s \textit{Love in the City} and \textit{The Romp}, Dibdin’s \textit{Fashionable Lovers}, Macready’s \textit{The Irishman in London}, and Pratt’s \textit{The New Cosmetic}.} (a point I develop further in the next chapter), \textit{The Negro Slaves}’ serious approach to the issue of slavery is a theatrical anomaly. Its serious tone puts it on par with the list of altered \textit{Oroonokos} that began appearing in 1759, but its graphic scenes of work, torture, infanticide, and murder on a slave plantation—so clearly not designed for all adult audi-
ences—actually identify a new and extreme approach to representing the issue when compared with Southerne’s and all of the other comparatively ungory Oroonokos. In the following two sections, I contend that Kotzebue consciously develops the genre of the exclusively read, intertextual, antislavery prose drama that I originally discussed in Chapter One, and appears to turn it into a new and more extreme political tool, informed, but not encumbered, by the legacies of Behn and Southerne, their texts, or the conservative liberalism that limited antislavery thought in the anonymous Oroonoko and The Grateful Negro.

As a serious piece of historically based antislavery propaganda, The Negro Slaves is far more definitive about freedom than Oroonoko and The Grateful Negro—texts that, I have shown, support ameliorative approaches to the problem of slavery, justified, in the latter text’s case, by Bryan Edwards’s History. In The Negro Slaves “Dedication,” Kotzebue eschews both Edwards and amelioration by recording and celebrating a definitive antislavery policy recently enacted by Denmark’s Regent, Fredrick VI. The edict for the abolition of the Danish slave trade was passed on March 16, 1792, a significantly different outcome from William Wilberforce’s attempt to pass a similar act in England only a year earlier. Even though the Danish edict did not become law until January 1, 1803, Denmark was still the first country in the world to enact it, and Kotzebue’s “Dedication” minces no words about his admiration of this effort: “I have fixed on the Negro-slaves as the vehicle . . . because the Danes were the first who dissolved the fetters of this unfortunate race, and because I am ambitious of making known my gratitude as a citizen of the world . . . to the whole Danish nation.” Composing his play in honor of a nation that has palpably demonstrated its dedication to the abolitionist cause shows that Kotzebue is using his drama to challenge, rather than succumb to, the soft, strategic voice of paternal tyranny and its ameliorative call. Moreover, he takes a more comprehensive historical view of slavery than Edgeworth, openly admitting that he extracts, sometimes verbatim, from French, German, Danish, and other European antislavery authorities and tracts. This expansive approach allows him to move his

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14. In his “Dedication,” to the 1796 version of The Negro Slaves, Kotzebue states: “Many traits in this piece are too horrible, and therefore, in the representation, several of them were omitted.”
15. See Chapter One, 45 and 63–67.
16. See Chapter Two, 87–92 for more on how Edgeworth is using Bryan Edwards.
17. For more on Danish involvement in slavery, particularly from a black woman’s perspective, see Eddie Donoghue’s Black Women / White Men: The Sexual Exploitation of Female Slaves in the Danish West Indies (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002).
18. In his “Dedication,” Kotzebue states that “Raynal’s Histoire Philosophique, Selle’s History of the Negro-Trade, Sprengel on Negro-Trade, Isert’s Travels into Guinea, the famous Black Code, and several scattered tracts in periodical works have fully supplied him with the materials” to create his drama (vii).
own text beyond the conservatism that was familiar to texts like *Oroonoko* and *The Grateful Negro*, which were focused on Britain's involvement with slavery, and towards a European perspective where the radical idea of abolition was not merely a future possibility, but a lived actuality.

Alongside the “Dedication,” *The Negro Slaves*’ title page (figure 9) provides more evidence of Kotzebue’s intent to present a more progressive stance against slavery. In keeping with contemporary conventions of Romanticism that utilized the ordinary man as a worthy site for poetic examination, and in contrast to titles such as *Oroonoko* and *The Grateful Negro* that privilege one extraordinary male African hero, Kotzebue’s title evokes a plurality of non-gender-specific “Negro Slaves,” and he is very particular about the genre he uses to represent this amorphous group.

Kotzebue “entreats his readers, spectators, and critics, not to consider this piece merely as a drama”; the hyphenated moniker “dramatic-historical” indicates his intent to blend, in real space and time onstage, the conditions of black slaves as they have been presented over the expanse of European history. Of course, using the space of, and time on, the stage to represent serious concerns about slavery was hardly a new proposition. By the time *The Negro Slaves* was published, Southerne’s *Oroonoko* had been rewritten at least five times, with John Ferriar’s *Prince of Angola* (1788) standing as the most recent example of an *Oroonoko* altered to appeal to contemporary British audiences’ burgeoning interest in antislavery. But the success, ascendancy, and frequency of these altered *Oroonokos* reveal a significant historical problem. Southerne’s play had, for decades, stood as the nation’s preeminent drama about slavery, and the altered *Oroonokos* that follow in its wake appear to popularize slavery’s injustice. By doing so, such works create the impression that altering *Oroonoko* is the best way for a serious dramatist to politicize antislavery injustice in the legitimate theater at the end of the eighteenth century. But the political usefulness of these altered *Oroonokos* is historically problematic since they did not alter the legend’s focus on an interracial relationship between slaves formerly of high rank and, thus, did not reflect the historical or contemporary experience of black African slavery.

Kotzebue seems well aware of this problem and keen to correct it in his own “dramatic-historical” antislavery drama. His *Negro Slaves* focuses on common, rather than royal, Africans in its title, and the historical focus of his genre hints that his text veers well away from the sentimental conventions that made dramatic *Oroonokos* appealing yet less-than-credible reflections of contemporary slavery.

However, the title page and genre choice are not the most important indications that he is redesigning elements from *Oroonoko* to make his own drama a politically and socially relevant experience of antislavery injustice.
THE NEGRO SLAVES,

A DRAMATIC-HISTORICAL PIECE,

IN THREE ACTS.

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN

OF

THE PRESIDENT DE KOTZEBUE.

Form'd with the same capacity of pain,
The same desire of pleasure and of ease;
Why feels not man for man?

THE WRONGS OF AFRICA.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR T. CADELL, JUNIOR, AND W. DAVIES,
(SUCCESSORS TO MR. CADELL) IN THE STRAND;
AND J. EDWARDS, IN PALL-MALL.

1796.
To achieve this focus, Kotzebue consciously produces two versions of *The Negro Slaves*, both of which are designed “to represent . . . the horrible cruelties which are practiced towards our black brethren,” but only one of which expresses these “horrible cruelties” all “at one view.”

Many traits in this piece are too horrible, and therefore, in the representation, several of them were omitted. This might be attended with advantage on the theatre; but in the publication, the author has been obliged to restore the omissions, otherwise his piece would not have had any claim to the title of an Historical Piece. (x)

Distinguishing between theatrical “representation” and read “publication” of the same antislavery piece, Kotzebue confirms the distinction I established in Chapter One between the exclusively read and previously performed versions of *Oroonoko.* The exclusively read dramatic text can do harsher, more historically accurate and affecting antislavery work than the performed one because, in this case, it allows the reader to become imaginatively immersed in all the “too horrible” traits that this dramatist deems necessary. Because he openly announces that his text intends to go beyond the experience of injustice common to staged adaptations of *Oroonoko*, Kotzebue distinguishes his drama. In contrast to Edgeworth and her efforts of ‘creative defamation’ in *The Grateful Negro*, I want to bring Kotzebue’s *The Negro Slaves* and the efforts it makes to redesign and imbue an exclusively read antislavery drama with social credibility and political relevance for the contemporary reader under a rubric that I will, henceforth, refer to as ‘creative reformation.’

The “DEDICATION” is the most obvious textual space where Kotzebue puts creative reformation directly into action. It describes him writing *The Negro Slaves* from a position of comfortable isolation—a “rural solitude at a distance from all that can be justly or unjustly called great” but “where love, friendship, independence crown [his] head daily with fresh flowers” (vi). From this position of extreme comfort and isolation, Kotzebue tells his dedicatee, the “Danish Counsellor of Justice and King of Denmark’s agent at the Russian Court”: “I will stretch out my hand to my brave friend and intreat him in the midst of his more public walk, sometimes to cast an eye on the peaceful shore, where his friend has raised himself a cottage under shady elms” (vi). This image of Kotzebue’s “peaceful shore” contrasts so starkly with the textual description he gives of Jamaica as “the island of tears”

19. See my discussion of the anonymous 1760 *Oroonoko* in Chapter One, 45, 63–67.
where “everything should grow green and prosper but cheerfulness” (41) that it cannot simply be read as a friendly request to be remembered enjoying the idyllic perks of rural sublimity. Such extreme differences in personal, geographic, and textual landscapes suggests that they are, in fact, interdependent; Kotzebue is only able to imagine Jamaica in his antislavery text by, first, recounting how far he is psychologically and physically removed from it in his “Dedication.” “Rural solitude” is, then, the ideal reflective space for this writer to imagine colonial horror, and he “is not ashamed to confess that while he was writing this piece he shed a thousand tears”—an emotional reaction that he, no doubt, expects to be repeated by readers reading his exclusively read drama in their own spaces of reflective solitude.

Contextualizing the author’s interdependent state of mind during the construction of *The Negro Slaves* also gives perspective to his outstretched, entreating hands. They are, undoubtedly, textual reconfigurations of those emblazoned on contemporary abolitionist paraphernalia wherein a male slave’s outstretched, pleading, and shackled hands ask to be remembered as “a man and a brother” (figure 10). Writing his antislavery “piece” from a space of reflective seclusion, Kotzebue in his “Dedication” presents his own comfortable hands alongside those of the shackled slaves he advocates for in the body of his text to actively connect himself to, yet acknowledge his difference from, this iconic image, and to claim an explicit identification with the common, rather than the royal, slave. In this way, Kotzebue’s “Dedication” creatively reforms an authorial problem that beset the altered *Oroonoko* and made them less effective portrayals of contemporary antislavery sentiment. His insightful identification with the common slave shows that he is politicizing drama where *Oroonoko* were romanticizing a royal interracial couple, and his sensitive authorial positioning alongside this common slave contrasts with the insensitivity of writers such as Edgeworth whose *The Grateful Negro* voices the combined interests of colonial paternalists and deliberately eclipses those of the black female slave.

The three-lined inscription on the title page offers another indication that Kotzebue is trying to creatively reform another of the authorial limitations that made *Oroonoko* less convincing as an antislavery drama. Excerpted from William Roscoe’s poem *The Wrongs of Africa* (1787), the inscription is quite pedestrian in its expression of a monotheistic belief in a single humanity. However, Kotzebue’s decision to use Roscoe’s poem as the ideological motif for his drama offers an additional source of evidence for continuing to think of *The Negro Slaves* as a creative reformation of contemporary anti-

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20. Quakers associated with the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade came up with the design of the chained, supplicating Negro in 1787.
slavery drama. For when Roscoe’s speaker attacks “the meretricious glare / Of crowded theatres, where . . . Sits Sensibility, with wa’try eye / Dropping o’er fancied woes her useless tear,” he is, clearly, critiquing the role that the theater and, by extension, dramatists such as Southerne played in catering to the viewer’s experience of seeing pain over the reality of its existence outside the theater. By evoking Roscoe’s poem, Kotzebue implies that he is aware of, and at least tacitly agrees with, its critique of the genre he excelled in.

23. Southerne was known to cater to audience interests. See the introduction to Novak and Rodes’s edition of *Oroonoko*. 
To overcome both the speciousness and overt sentimentality of theatrical representation, his “Dedication” claims to document for “readers, spectators, and critics, all of the horrible cruelties which are practiced towards our black brethren” (vii). Unlike *Oroonoko* and *The Grateful Negro*, which, I have shown, are capable of articulating the “horrible cruelties” done to white women under the Hardwicke Act as well as privilege the benevolence of the white men responsible for the Amelioration Act, *The Negro Slaves*’ explicit focus on “horrible cruelties” done to blacks aligns it with Roscoe’s *Wrongs of Africa* not only in focus, but also in effect. Kotzebue intends to present in an exclusively read historical piece images that can shock consumers of literature with the force of poetry by graphically confronting cruelties in ways that will have a lasting impression in the theater of the mind.

*The Negro Slaves* shows no interest in considering the “horrible cruelties” that were practiced by blacks against whites, however, a bias that his contemporaries did not share. *The Grateful Negro* and the anonymous *Oroonoko* both make much of the fear of violence that white colonists lived under in Surinam and Jamaica, and as Victor Hugo’s *Bug Jargal* (1818), Heinrich Von Kleist’s *The Betrothal in Santo Domingo* (1811), and Claire de Duras’s *Ourika* (1823) show, such fears were at a peak when incidents such as the Haitian Revolution, the Great Maroon War, and Tacky’s Rebellion took place. But even this failure to address black violence against whites stands as another of Kotzebue’s authorial acts of deliberate creative reformation. His focus on the horrors experienced by “our black brethren” shows him using his exclusively read play to creatively reform the nature of the reader’s dramatic experience. It is not designed for the viewer to empathize with individuals who look and act like them—a theatrical experience that *Oroonoko* encouraged and Roscoe vilified; rather, Kotzebue wants his readers to fully imagine the horror and pain of those who do not look like them. His drama encourages reflection on the constant state of fear under which blacks lived as well as the “horrible cruelties” that were far more prevalent in their lives on a daily basis than were intermittent revolts and insurrections. By locating fear and violence as African rather than European experiences, the exclusively read edition of *The Negro Slaves* distinguishes itself from *Oroonoko* and *The Grateful Negro* because it creatively reforms the theatrical experience of reading, moving it more toward educating about difference and away from using slavery as a motif for European sentimental entertainment.

24. Southern’s *Oroonoko* has an early scene where the colonists are afraid of the blacks joining an Indian rebellion.

25. For a brief history of the Jamaican revolts, see Aravamudan’s edition of *Obi*. Also see Richard Hart’s *Slaves Who Abolished Slavery* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies, 1980).
Thus, Kotzebue’s pretextual identification, authorial positioning, narrative focus, and editorial effort all reveal his intentions to use *The Negro Slaves* as an opportunity to advance a more progressive antislavery stance in ways that will overcome some of the structural, social, political, and authorial shortcomings that previous attempts at progressive antislavery drama fell into and future antislavery texts would not necessarily correct. His *Negro Slaves* is a text in which the horrors of slavery are not held back, the characters are not royal and not primarily male, and the pain they experience is gruesome, unromanticized, historically credible, and primarily focused on illuminating the life of the slave and not merely the sensibility of the reader.

However, I have not yet pointed out Kotzebue’s two most important acts of creative reformation as he turns his *The Negro Slaves* into an appropriately politicized antislavery drama. They appear in his plot and dramatis personae. Set in the British colony of Jamaica, the play takes place on what seems to be a huge slave plantation where coffee, sugar, and cotton are all produced. Two Englishmen—John, “a rich planter,” and William, “his [younger] brother”—inherit the plantation after their father dies. William, however, has been getting an education in Europe and he returns to the plantation to find John (who, it seems, has never left Jamaica) committing heinous acts of cruelty to his slaves. Paul, “the superintendent or overseer of the slaves,” executes John’s cruelties on an assortment of slaves, notably Truro, “an Old Free Negro,” and Lilli, an unmarried Congolese woman, and one of “two young female Negro slaves” mentioned in the dramatis personae. The play’s central narrative, however, revolves around the other black African woman, Ada, who faces the most threatening malevolence because John owns, covets, and is intent on forcing her to accede to him sexually. Ada, however, resists his demands because she still acknowledges her marriage to Zameo, whom she thinks she has left behind in Africa but who, unbeknownst to her, resides on the same plantation.

In this play wherein young and old, male and female, enslaved and free, married and single, separated and reunited, European, African, and Creole characters all coexist, Kotzebue creates a plantation society that is a far more diverse, realistic, and complex sampling of slave life than is depicted in *Oroonoko* or *The Grateful Negro*. Moreover, the plot device wherein two idealized black African lovers are each separately enslaved in Africa only to be reunited in a British West Indian colony where they attempt to reconstruct their former marriages under the new conditions of colonial slavery dominated by Creole tyrants underscores that *The Negro Slaves* is an antislavery drama that readers and spectators both are completely familiar with: it is none other than a structurally, politically, and creatively reformed adaptation of *Oroonoko*. 
But one figure’s absence is noticeably glaring from the dramatis personae: the white woman. Kotzebue’s decision not to include this figure as a heroine or even as a character in his play could well be a tacit reminder of the “shortage of white women in eighteenth century Jamaica” that Hilary Beckles believes “explains in part the rapid rise of the mulatto population.” However, in his analysis of Thomas Thistlewood, the Jamaican slave-holder, prolific diarist, and serial rapist of black slave women, Beckles also points out that this shortage alone may have played little part in a white planter’s attraction to black slave women: “While [Thistlewood] indicates, by his silence [in his diaries], the infrequency of social contact with white women, no statement is made to the effect that black women were targeted because of a shortage, or absence of white women.” Kotzebue’s decision to exclude the white woman, then, could be an attempt to capture, historically, the real absence of white women from Jamaican plantation life; but by doing so, his play also focuses attention on the threat of rape that African women experienced under planters such as Thistlewood.

Resurrecting the African heroine’s black skin color in a dramatically altered version of *Oroonoko* are Kotzebue’s two most important acts of creative reformation. Thomas Bellamy’s *The Benevolent Planters* (1787) and Archibald MacLaren’s *The Negro Slaves* (1799) are indications that Kotzebue’s *Negro Slaves* was not the first or even the only attempt during the 1790s to present a common black African heroine on the English stage. But by excising from the *Oroonoko* legend the white yet familiarly English woman that, for an entire century, had embodied the female African slave experience onstage, and replacing her with not only one black African woman but three additional ones in a play whose business is to promote all the “horrible cruelties” done to our black brethren, Kotzebue’s drama bolsters its reputation as the most politicized version of the *Oroonoko* legend in the eighteenth century, and the one most likely to resurrect, in a new light, the spirit of the black African heroine, Imoinda.

Of the many textual indications that Kotzebue’s *Negro Slaves* is a more politically relevant and socially credible illustration of the *Oroonoko* legend, then, I am suggesting that none is more purposeful than his characterization of the drama’s heroine, Ada, as a creatively reformed Imoinda. I have already discussed how Southerne’s and the anonymous *Oroonokos* use textual categories of difference (religion, dress, marriage) to underscore Imoinda’s

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27. Ibid., 41.
African-ness despite her white complexion, thereby making these heroines Africans along the lines of Behn’s original black heroine. In his textual resurrection of the *Oroonoko* legend, Kotzebue continues in this tradition of exploiting the African-ness of his heroine. After one hundred years of exposure to the *Oroonoko* legend, contemporary readers would have known the African heroine for her beauty, integrity, and fidelity to Oroonoko, and Kotzebue evokes these qualities, explicitly, in his Ada.

Kotzebue constructs Ada’s black African beauty by referring to, yet building upon, one of the odd characteristics that made Behn’s “Black Venus” beautiful. Lilli refers to it when she makes a comment about African women’s unique deformity: “the scars on our faces add to our beauty” (I.vii). But where Behn states that those, like Imoinda, “who are Nobly born of that Country, are so delicately Cut and Rac’d all over the fore-part of the Trunk of their Bodies” (40), Lilli refers to it as a sign of the common African woman’s beauty since neither she nor Ada are “Nobly born.” Their master, John, appears to agree; he calls Ada “a beautiful woman” despite her implied African scars. By describing the deformity that exoticizes these women as typically, rather than uniquely, African and appealing, Kotzebue makes the idea of scarification less horrific, less exclusive, and more egalitarian than Behn, thereby leading to his creation of an appealing, rather than repulsive, common black African slave woman as a heroine.

Beauty of any kind has its privileges, and despite her common slave status, Ada still has the power to partake of them as she is observed to “gormand at a dainty table . . . [and] stretch [her] limbs on a soft mattress” (I.ii). Such perks come with a price, however. Truro reminds her that by encouraging John’s advances, she can “lessen the severity of both [her] fate and [the other slaves]; of [hers] by submission, of [theirs] by gentle entreaties” (I.ii). Where Behn and Southerne restrict Imoinda’s sexual and reproductive struggles only to the burden of keeping her own beautiful royal body inviolate from the unwanted sexual advances of men, Kotzebue suggests that Ada’s virtue could potentially lie not in keeping her body inviolate, since Truro reminds her, “you are not . . . a king’s wife that according to our laws, to touch you is death” (I.ii), but in the sacrificial way she chooses to use it for the larger good of the black slave collective. Ada refuses to compromise her marriage vow, however, proclaiming, “it is love alone not royal dignities that can make a woman faithful” (I.ii). By depicting her taking this determined stance on marital fidelity, Kotzebue delivers another of his pointed and egalitarian

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28. See Chapter One, 54–57.
29. Historically, Thomas Thistlewood’s mistress, Phibba, could be seen as one such woman. See Douglas Hall’s *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750–86* (London: Macmillan, 1989) for more on her.
creative reformations of Imoinda’s spirit. Rather than using her African beauty for sexual bartering, a horrible cruelty that enslaved black women are known to have done at this time, Ada demands the same rights to acknowledge and vindicate the virtuous hand she gave in marriage as her famous literary forebear, Imoinda. In his construction of a common yet uncompromisingly virtuous and beautiful black African heroine, Kotzebue creatively reforms the contemporary view of black African woman who falls within “Imoinda’s shade” by underscoring that she need not be “Nobly born” to be morally noble. Sexual integrity and marital fidelity are other Imoinda-esque qualities that combine with African beauty to make Kotzebue’s common black African slave woman the equal of Behn’s heroine.

But of all the acts of creative reformation that Kotzebue establishes between them, their heroic parallels are most important because they contain the most affecting examples of antislavery injustice, and thus, the most potential for challenging the soft strategic voice of paternal tyranny and its ameliorative call.

To eighteenth-century readers, Imoinda would have been known not merely for her beauty and virtue but also for the two heroic acts that most attest to her unique brand of resistance to both paternalism and the institution of slavery: attacking the Deputy Governor, and accepting her own death by suicide. Kotzebue creatively reforms the spirit of these heroic acts in his representations of Ada and her battle with John. Where Behn makes Imoinda’s confrontation with the Deputy Governor about marriage and reproductive freedom, Southerne and Kotzebue make their respective African women’s battles with paternalists about marriage and sexual freedom. Southerne introduces the Deputy Governor as a sexual predator who is keen to dispose of Oroonoko so that he can satiate his lust for Imoinda. Kotzebue creatively reforms the dynamics of this sexual encounter between the white man and the married black woman to make this a harsher moment of crisis than his contemporary readers had encountered in any of the altered Oroonokos. Even worse than the Deputy Governor, who at least allows Oroonoko and Imoinda the chance to reunite as a couple once they discover each other in Surinam, John has no intention of letting Ada reconnect with her husband once she reencounters Zameo in Jamaica. He immediately divides them, locking Ada up in a prisonlike room and tying Zameo to a tree where, from a window, Ada is able to witness him about to be beheaded. John then gives her an ultimatum: she must agree to willingly submit to him sexually, thereby saving her husband’s life, or refuse to submit, whereby her husband will die and she will be forcibly raped. He has already demonstrated his

30. See History of Jamaica (London: Lowndes, 1774), 328–36, for Edward Long’s discussion of the ways in which women of color are involved in sexual bartering.
ability to “tame” an unnamed “wild girl” (I.ii). John uses her husband’s beheading as the torture designed to “tame” her into sexual compliance. These are the explicit sexual terms in which the battle between the common African woman and the paternal tyrant over the control and disposal of her body are laid out in *The Negro Slaves*.

Kotzebue goes to great lengths to establish a connection between Ada and Imoinda’s spirit of heroism. In response to John’s threat, Ada begins to display the belligerent spirit of Behn’s rebel-wife. She becomes physically and mentally aggressive with respect to herself and the paternalists who oppress her, telling Lilli:

**ADA:** Furnish me with a knife  
**LILLI:** A knife? For what? . . .  
**ADA:** Whether this arm is to save my innocence, or whether God has ordained me to be the avenger of thousands, I know not; but let me have a knife that I may feel composed. (III.iii)

Her request for a knife to commit either suicide or vengeance against “thousands” recalls both the knife that Imoinda used against herself in Southerne’s *Oroonoko* as well as the bow and arrow that she used against the British militia in Behn’s novella.

In addition, after feigning submission to John’s sexual demands, Ada convinces him to relent and grant her one final meeting with Zameo. During this meeting, Ada tries to convince Zameo to kill her: “give me death!” she tells him, “Death by thy hand! . . . Take this knife and plunge it in my breast” (III.viii).31 Ada’s request conveys the spirit of scenes from both Behn’s and Southerne’s *Oroonoko* in which the “Heroick Wife” is “faster pleading for death than [her African husband] was to propose it” (60). Like Oroonoko, Zameo is hesitant. To convince her husband, Ada conjures up a graphic image of rape and emasculation: “A few more minutes and he [John] will come to take me away; you will hear my groans—you will hear the last sigh of my dying innocence—with insulting smiles will he present himself before your eyes—triumphantly exclaiming 'Tis over! . . . Will you deliver me yourself to the tiger’s mouth?” (III.viii). Ada forces Zameo to experience both thoughts with references to her “groans,” “last sigh of innocence,” and John’s “smiles.” The effect is immediate. Zameo agrees to kill her. Kotzebue creatively reforms this scene by making a common black slave wife the prime agent, orchestrating an honor killing as her own rather than her husband’s choice, as it appears to be in Behn’s *Oroonoko*.

Firm in her resolve to die, Ada’s virtuous body also undergoes a drastic enlargement: “Ah what slumbering vigor has awakened in me! I am no more what I was, my heart expands, my bosom swells” (III.ii). Here, her expanding heart and swelling bosom are different manifestation of Imoinda’s “big” body on the Surinam battlefield, representing the heroic expansion of the common black African woman’s capacity for feminine virtue.

Clearly, Kotzebue’s explicit parallels are designed to resurrect in Ada the heroic spirit of the “Constant” rebel-wife Imoinda and her quest for freedom in order to magnify the common black African woman’s femininity for politicized ends. African women employed alongside men on the plantation fields were not always viewed according to their gender. As Hilary Beckles notes: “the predominate image associated with the representation of the black woman was that of great strength—the symbol of blackness, masculinity and absence of finer feeling. Her sexuality was projected as overtly physical (no broken hearts here!) . . . social immorality, perversity and promiscuity were maintained by her.”

Instead of this kind of masculinized superwoman or the extremely violent representations of plantation women that Edgeworth creates, Kotzebue’s Ada is a more progressive construction of a big black woman because she resurrects Imoinda’s heroic role as a legitimate female heroine of virtue and counteracts the genderless and violent contemporary impressions of actual black women on Jamaican plantations.

However, explicit physical, mental, and heroic parallels between fictional common and the noble black African slave women do not, by themselves, make The Negro Slaves a radical intervention into the antislavery discourse that Oroonoko dominated in the eighteenth century. They merely reinforce the fact that the spirit of Oroonoko’s Imoinda is being resurrected in The Negro Slaves’ Ada in order to raise the profile and importance of the common married black woman so that she may be seen within the heroic context of “Imoinda’s shade,” thereby politicizing the contemporary black slave woman’s experience of violence.

The Negro Slaves makes its radical intervention into the discourse of slavery only seconds before Zameo is about to execute Ada. Truro arrives with emancipating news: “You are free,” he proclaims to Ada, “(pointing to William) Thanks to him.” John’s estranged brother has “given up half his fortune” (III.ix) to secure her freedom. With this last-minute reprieve, the play creatively reforms the Oroonoko-esque ending that Kotzebue had meticulously set up and makes a radical emancipating gesture toward freedom and marriage. Zameo and Ada’s relationship will not merely be reestablished in Jamaica under the aegis of William’s benevolent paternalism. Having

32. Beckles, Centering Woman, xx.
previously attained his freedom from John, Zameo was committed to leaving Jamaica with William, telling Ada during their final meeting: “From the coast of Europe my eyes will wander over the ocean, and seek thy dear image in every cloud that rises from the sea” (III.viii). Now that William has successfully bought and freed them both, the climactic assumption is that both she and Zameo will go somewhere in “Europe” where they will be free to live as husband and wife.

This is the radical antislavery message about freedom that The Negro Slaves markets. By explicitly connecting Ada with Imoinda but refusing to allow his heroine to complete the honor killing that Imoinda popularized as a macabre liberation from slavery, Kotzebue creatively reforms the depiction of the common black African heroine and provides his readers with a solution to the problem of slavery that Oroonoko and its many alterations did not imagine and that Edgeworth considered and then dismissed in the 1810 Belinda. The death of an idealized black African couple is not the means of truly achieving a psychological and political victory over slavery; their immigration to Europe—to an enlightened place such as Denmark or even England—is. Each of the three chapters in Part Two of this book explore how contemporary writers take this radical idea of freedom through immigration into account and apply it to Britain in a series of marriage plots involving black women in England who confront paternalists and promote abolition on Britain’s own terra firma. But with respect to The Negro Slaves, Kotzebue makes the common yet beautiful, morally big with virtue and rebellious African wife the most heroic illustration of resistance to the sexual will of John, and then rewards her with marriage, guaranteed freedom, and presumed independence for her valiant display of African heroism. This move presents Ada as a more socially victorious and politically conscious version of the rebel-wife, Imoinda. It is Kotzebue’s decision to creatively reform Oroonoko’s African romance as a drama that promotes marriage and freedom for African slaves in this life and not the afterlife that makes his Negro Slaves a radical intervention into antislavery discourse. But his efforts in this vein don’t end with Ada, however; they also involve William.

He is a staunch abolitionist who recoils at John’s abuse of slaves and openly admires William Wilberforce and the King of Denmark for their fervent commitments to abolition. But William is still guilt-ridden about his financial connections to slavery. His own luxurious maintenance, including an elaborate liberal education in Europe, has depended on the profits of slavery and he is ashamed of it, blushing “for every shilling in my pocket! Every

33. The English translator includes a personal dedication to Wilberforce, and within the text, William praises Wilberforce as one who “defends [Negro] rights with fervid eloquence” (II.iii) and as “that man, whose noble heart has made him an orator in the cause of humanity” (II.i).
morsel put into my mouth [which] is embittered by the tears of suffering human nature” (I.vi). With this depiction of the sympathetic and conflicted Englishman, Kotzebue creatively reforms the liberal conservative stance of proslavery advocates such as Maria and Blandford in the anonymous Oroonoko, and (later) Mr. Edwards in The Grateful Negro, who represent a Creole society that would rather slavery did not exist but are not emotionally conflicted by their positions of financial and social superiority in relation to slaves in a colonial society. William’s shame and guilt is a pointed critique of the self-interest and hypocrisy of this advantageous position that sympathetic colonial whites held. By renouncing most of his fortune to buy this idealized African couple and taking them to a free Europe, William endorses immigration as an expensive yet viable solution to the problem of colonial slavery. If antislavery is to be a successful venture, Britons must be willing to sacrifice future profits and fully commit to the ideal of freedom for all as William is beginning to do.

The Negro Slaves represents a pinnacle of radical antislavery drama because it uses a common black African heroine and an enlightened white Englishman to justify its politically extreme position on immigration at a time in which Britain had not even successfully taken up the charge of abolishing the slave trade. And there is evidence that at least one British dramatist is inclined to follow Kotzebue’s lead. Archibald MacLaren’s one-act drama, The Negro Slaves (1799), has a Jamaican slave, Quako, proclaim to his African bride, Sela, “Then we shall go to England, and be free Britons” (I.v.23).\(^{34}\) Immigration is only one of the two possible endings that Kotzebue provides to his play, however. The other is also liberating but not anywhere near as radical, and this fact connects it to the ending of William Earle’s Obi, another text which resurrects the African heroine yet splits its ending. Before I discuss the effects that these endings have on the resurrected African heroine, however, I want to, first, outline the way Obi is similar to The Negro Slaves in its approach to antislavery, Imoinda, and Oroonoko.

Where The Negro Slaves creatively reforms an Oroonoko-esque marriage plot, offering immigration rather than death as a radical solution to the common Africans’ experience of slavery, the African widow Amri from William Earle’s novel Obi; or, the History of Three Fingered Jack, is involved in another kind of radical antislavery intervention during this period that begins to take shape in the scant details of what is known about the author’s life.

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In the tremendously informative and detailed introduction to the most recent edition of Earle’s novel, Srinivas Aravamudan reveals that there is very little known about the life of this young author, who was a mere nineteen years old at the time of *Obi*’s publication. But one of the few surviving facts about him revolves around the accusation that his play *Natural Faults* (1799) was a plagiarized version of Marie Thérèse De Camp’s *First Faults*. In the preface to *Natural Faults*, Earle acquits himself of this charge by counterclaiming that De Camp had actually built her play upon the foundations of his original script, which had been sent to her by another hand. He also declares that his play was founded primarily on Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771), but that it also owed its influence to “an old newspaper, in which [he] read an account of a meeting in Hyde Park between a father and a seducer, each of whom, equally unwilling to wound his antagonist, fired his pistols in the air. I caught hold of the idea,” Earle remarks, “and instantly dramatized it. All the rest is my own” (vi, preface). Clearly, he provides this information, and indeed, publishes *Natural Faults*, to counter the charge against him and take direct public action against De Camp for staging his play as her own. Scant though this information is, it presents Earle as a conscious and conscientious intertextualist who demands the right to be acknowledged and credited for his creative work.

This fleeting glimpse of the young Earle as an outraged, earnest, and original intertextualist aggressively pursuing a public act of revenge on a woman who not only uses his labor without credit, but profits from it, makes for an interesting ideological insight into the mind of this young author one year before he publishes his novel about revenge and slavery in Jamaica. Earle’s novel does not contain a host of pretextual indicators that spell out his interest in, and reasons for, entering the antislavery fray; yet, it does include an “Advertisement” at the very beginning of the text in which he personally applauds Jack for “[standing] alone a bold and daring defender of the Rights of Man” (68). “Bold and daring” were certainly not the usual adjectives writers had used to describe Three Fingered Jack in earlier historical accounts. Thus, Earle’s use of them, alongside his obviously aggrieved mindset over the plagiarism charge, offers the first indications that this young author is ideologically contradicting the stance on this notorious figure held by his contemporaries at the same time that his personal life is consumed.

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36. Preface to *Natural Faults* (London: Earle and Hemet, 1799), iii–iv. Earle claims that De Camp “intended to have [*Natural Faults*] performed for her benefit” (viii).

37. See Benjamin Moseley’s *Medical Tracts* (London: Nichols, 1800), 197–205. Also see Aravamudan’s introduction to *Obi*, 10–17.
with notions of individual rights and revenge. *Obi* offers a way to bring his personal and ideological positions together.

Alan Richardson has noted that Obi or Obeah—a term that Aravamudan defines as “a set of practices and beliefs produced by the cultural synthesis of enslaved populations drawn from a number of African locations” (8, *Obi*)—was all the rage in British literature between 1797 and 1807; but the period 1800–1802 is an especially rich time for literature that focused on this theme, with John Fawcett’s pantomime *Obi*; or, *Three Finger’d Jack* appearing in 1800 to be followed, almost immediately, by Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda* (1801) and *The Grateful Negro* (1802), both of which contain significant Obi episodes. Advertisements for Earle’s *Obi* appear on October 31, 1800, a few months after Fawcett’s pantomime made its first run at the Haymarket theater with no less than nineteen performances during the course of the summer season. The close proximity between the two publications suggests that Earle may have written his novel to capitalize on the popularity that the Obi theme had generated during this period, not to mention the public success that Fawcett had already garnered in the theater that year. The affronted mind-set displayed by this young author after his public spat with De Camp suggests that Earle was probably not inclined to plagiarize Fawcett’s pantomime, yet he may have seen in it a way to express his own personal and ideological frustrations.

Jeffrey Cox believes that pantomime might actually have been the perfect genre for a play such as *Obi* because its “unconventional form provided an opportunity to put on stage some potentially radical material. This is not to suggest that Fawcett’s play embraces Jack,” Cox qualifies; but “there are . . . features of the play that work against its overarching conservatism.” Some of these features include having a famous actor such as Charles Kemble or Ira Aldrige play the part of Jack, thereby giving the title role a gravitas that allowed the villainous black to be recognized as something more than merely base. Music was also used to influence the way a viewer experiences Jack in a particular scene. But gesture is, perhaps, the most important device in a pantomime genre deprived of words, because it makes the body speak. For example, in the scene in which Jack appears loaded with Captain Orford’s “sash, epaulettes, gorget etc. of which he has robbed him” (10), audiences would have recognized this as a villainous gesture since this young,

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white Captain has been acknowledged from the very beginning of the play as the betrothed husband of Rosa, the Planter’s daughter and heroine of the drama. But the fact that Jack steals Orford’s military insignia rather than any material goods implies that he is interested more in robbing the authority of those men of power charged with maintaining the status quo of white ascendency in Jamaica. In Fawcett’s pantomime, Jack’s gestures against the colonial paternalists contain within them the marks of a simple robber and an avenger of slavery, establishing his own power by stripping white men of theirs.

Despite such “bold and daring” gestures, however, Jack is completely vanquished at the end of Fawcett’s play when three enterprising slaves—Quashee, Tuckey, and Sam—kill him. In a scene reminiscent of the climax to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, “Two Slaves bearing Jack’s Head and Hand” participate in the “Grand March and Procession” around the stage as the entire company—a mass of actors comprising in excess of eighty-three people—assembles for the final song and dance to celebrate Jack’s physical destruction. The “bells,” “triangles,” “streamers,” “illuminated lanterns,” “green leaves,” “poles,” and the like that litter the stage give it an overwhelming spectacle of carnival and jubilation, drowning out any sense of loss or tragedy for the fallen slave. The overall effect of this highly orchestrated “Finale” is sheer appreciation that Jack’s presence has been extinguished from this society, complete adulation for the slaves who achieved this feat, and relief that order has been reestablished in this colonial slave society. Fawcett’s *Obi* is ultimately, then, a text that clearly acknowledges Jack’s “bold and daring” gestures against the institution of slavery but ultimately refuses to vindicate or validate them as heroic.

In his novel, Earle does not change the essentials of Jack’s story and character as seen on Fawcett’s stage; however, his *Obi* does explain the African’s “bold and daring” gestures as viable heroic responses to the problem of slavery. This novelistic effort to reframe Jack’s villainy as heroism relies heavily on Earle’s connections to three women and one text: Behn, Imoinda, Amri, and *Oroonoko*.

There is enough circumstantial evidence contained in the scant details of Earle’s known life to propose that he had probably read *Oroonoko* as well as seen it performed before he began to write *Obi*. His preface to *Natural Faults* mentions his great interest in writing for the theater, a fact that would make seeing plays and reading them part of his informal apprenticeship, and his audacious claim that Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* is “that perhaps
best novel in the English language” suggests that he had probably perused enough novels as the son of a London bookseller to make this claim with some credibility. One of them might well have been Behn’s *Oroonoko*.

With his access to both versions easily within his grasp, there is every reason to believe that Earle’s familiarity with *Oroonoko* formed part of his thinking for his own slavery novel, just as *The Man of Feeling* had previously influenced his *Natural Faults*. However, I want to make the case that Behn’s *Oroonoko* had a particularly strong influence on Earle’s *Obi*. Proof for this comes out not only because they are both marketed as historical novels in their titles but also in the textual parallels between Jack’s and Oroonoko’s portrayals at crucial moments in each novel. These African men are from different ranks and tribes—Jack is a common Felloop; Oroonoko a royal Coramantien (Koromantyn)—yet, Aravamudan notes that “There are parallel thoughts in the speech that Jack makes . . . and the well-known speech of Oroonoko rousing his countrymen.” Another example of this kind involves Jack “clasping the infected bodies” of his mother, Amri, and his best friend, Mahali, “already putrid from the heat of the climate” (150), a scene that recaptures Oroonoko “mourning over the dead Idol of his heart [Imoinda],” whose body “smelt a Stink that almost struck [those assembled round her] dead” (62). However, it is not the parallels between Behn’s and Earle’s heroes that I want to focus on, but on the experiences of their heroines. In what I am going to read as a politicized act of creative reformation, Earle builds on Behn’s Imoinda by presenting Amri as an intriguing mother figure who embodies two types of maternalism—one that the “big” Imoinda made famous in the wilds of Surinam, the other that Behn and her *Oroonoko* made famous in the world of British literature.

The first act of creative reformation involves constructing the fictional African, Amri, in the role of historical storyteller about slavery. Earle makes her deliver an “African tale,” the synopsis of which is as follows. She and Makro are ideal lovers living a blissful married existence in Africa until the day they find two white men, Captain Harrop, and a young boy, William Sebald, shipwrecked off the coast. They are rescued by the African couple and nurtured back to health. After converting the Africans to a vague form of Christianity, Harrop, the elder of the two white men, plans to return to Jamaica via a slave ship that docks at the African harbor. He trepans Amri.

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42. Ibid, iv.

43. Indeed, *A New Catalogue of the Extensive and Well-Chosen Collection of English books; being part of Earle’s original French, English, Spanish and Italian Circulating Library* (Nichols, 1799) lists both Behn’s collected novels and Southerne’s collected plays as part of Earle’s father’s collection (24, 67).

44. *Obi*, 110, note.
and Makro and sells them into slavery. In Jamaica, Harrop’s villainy shifts its focus. Through devious machinations, he also manages to marry William’s rich sweetheart, Harriet Mornton, an event that causes William to turn savage and take to residing in the hills of Jamaica, away from civilization. The Jamaica romance involving William and Harriet is important and I will return to it at the end of this chapter, but it is not a part of Amri’s “African tale.” While on board the slave ship, Jack’s father, Makro, eventually dies after receiving five hundred lashes for insubordination. But before his death, he issues a chilling request to his wife: “Oh! Amri, I beseech you, live. . . . Take this girdle from my loins, and keep it in your possession. If the being to whom you are to give life, be male, let him wear it from his earliest birth, and whisper in his ear, till manhood dawns, what he owes to his country. Inspire his young bosom with revenge” (90).

One can view Amri’s “African tale” merely as the frame story to Jack’s being and purpose in the novel; but the fact that Earle purposely makes a common black woman deliver this fictional “African tale” involves it, and her, in an actual history of antislavery narratives created by women. Amri literally conceives this tale with Makro during the middle passage, carries it into Jamaica, and gives birth to it when she narrates it to Jack as an adult. Behn provides an intriguing parallel to Amri’s reproductive act of oral storytelling since she, too, conceives the Oroonoko story allegedly on a trip to Surinam, carries it for twenty-five years, and literally gives birth to it in 1688. For her effort, Algernon Swinburne heralded Behn as “the first literary abolitionist—the first champion of the slave on record in the history of fiction; in other words, in the history of creative literature.” Despite such accolades, critics have traditionally interpreted Behn’s antislavery stance in Oroonoko as, at best, ambiguous; yet its ambiguity does not negate the narrative’s political significance. Oroonoko may have been Behn’s strategic opportunity to draw attention to events of the Glorious Revolution and articulate her rebellious support for the dethroned King James II. Giving birth to the text in 1688 certainly gives credence to the idea that she used the Oroonoko narrative as a strategic political weapon.

The fictional Amri and the literal Behn can be viewed, equally, as figures of a kind of strategic narrative maternalism, one that corresponds with Andrea O’Reilly and Silvia Caporale Bizzini’s notion of “maternal autobiography,” a term that politicizes “mothers’ experiences as they are storied and narrated.” Although their print and oral tales are delivered at deliberate points in time in order to influence political events, Behn and Amri’s acts

of creation also politicize each narrative mother’s autobiographical experience. In creating *Oroonoko*, Behn politicizes her personal frustrations as a woman writer as much as she conveys her royalist sympathies. But in *Obi*, Earle politicizes more than the black woman’s ability to tell her story. In addition to giving Amri an oral tale, Earle also makes her an expectant mother, one whose body stands as another evocation of the battle that the fictional Imoinda had originally fought against Creole tyranny. In that episode, Imoinda used poisoned arrows to oppose the Deputy Governor. In *Obi*, Amri’s body is, itself, the loaded weapon: she must reproduce a male child to carry out Makro’s dying request. Identified as “the only offspring of the loins of Makro” (74), Jack is live ammunition housed in Amri’s womb, waiting for the spark of her “African tale” to aim his vengeance on Harrop. Jack’s actual birth, then, creatively reforms the context of the representative battle between the African mother and the white colonial tyrant illustrated in *Oroonoko* and resurrected in Jenny Sharpe’s research on the indomitable figure, Nanny, “the most celebrated woman from the era of slavery in Jamaica” who, Sharpe says, “is remembered as a symbolic fighter as well as a symbolic mother” to a “group of rebellious maroons.”47 No longer must the black African mother fight on behalf of her child’s future, as Imoinda does; instead, this mother and child are locked together in a coterminous, symbiotic fight against colonial tyranny. In Amri and her “African tale” and in the absence of actual African women writers of slave narratives, Earle creatively reformulates Imoinda’s spirit of antislavery aggression against Creole paternalists by bringing together and politicizing the black African woman’s roles as both narrative and biological reproducer.

**USING EARLE’S *Obi* and Behn’s *Oroonoko*, I have been arguing that narrative maternalism is about women authors strategically reproducing tales to influence political events, and Amri’s literal maternalism is about reproducing individuals to participate alongside her in one specific political event. If we combine these two maternalist roles, as I think Earle intends that we do, the full extent of Amri’s strategic role in the novel emerges. The narrative and literal elements of her maternalism are brought together in *Obi* to form a malevolent attack that destabilizes Creole ascendancy from two hate-filled directions.

“Torn from the arms of her husband, her family and friends, while in the may-day of her life, from her native Africa,” the “beautiful slave,” Amri, “had vowed to curse the European race forever; and had a son, in whose

47. *Ghosts of Slavery*, xvi–xvii; 7; 1.
breast she never failed to nurture the baneful passion of revenge” (71). Jack is, essentially, an empty vessel within which Amri transfers her resentment for “the European race,” and he is nurtured on this psychological diet of hate. Far from completely ruining him, however, Earle suggests that this diet of hate actually improves Jack’s disposition in substantive ways. To elevate her son’s mind, Amri teaches Jack “to despise his groaning companions,” the other slaves—to be “superior to [their] whining,” thereby ensuring that their victimized slave mentality will never define him. Hate is also presented as the psychological motivation for an African’s love of self, continent, country, and tribe. Even though he was born in Jamaica, Amri tells Jack: “My son, your country borders on the Gambia, and its inhabitants are distinguished from all others by the name of Feloops. Remember that the spirit of our nation is, Never to forget an injury, but to ripen in our breasts the seeds of hate for those who betray us” (74). In her eyes, hate is a retaliatory process of African duty and honor, and after twenty-two years of instructing him in it, Amri ensures that her son is not the servile black Creole slave he was destined to be but a virtuous black African man free in mind if not in body or location. At a time where Edward Long’s History of Jamaica states that masters as well as slaves are stigmatizing Africans as primitive, Earle deploys African hate as the dynamic source for the African’s liberty under slavery and privileges Amri as one of the “mainly African born women” Richard Burton identifies who “were among [Creolization’s] most active opponents, clinging to ancestral beliefs, customs, and memories… ‘singing [their] country’…in anger and anguish at what they had suffered.”

Where Amri deploys African hate in order to reproduce a new kind of virtuous African man free of the stigmas of slavery, her “African tale” deploys hate to produce a new kind of virtuous and liberated European man. This “African tale” takes up only a minor amount of narrative space in the entire Obi text, which is, essentially, an epistolary novel that presents Jack’s life story in a series of letters written by George Stanford, an enlightened Englishman living in Jamaica, and sent to his friend, Charles, in England. These letters are presumed to be Stanford’s own testament of the deplorable practice of slavery in Jamaica as he sees it. Yet Amri’s “African tale” completely dominates Stanford’s emotions, letters, opinions, and voice. He claims to “set down in her own words as near as [his] memory can trace. MAKRO and AMRI, AN AFRICAN TALE” (73), essentially using his letters as a vehicle for Amri’s “own words” of hatred for “the European race.” In this combined text, Amri and Stanford speak, symbiotically, as one

49. Burton, Afro-Creole, 32.
literary body ideologically opposed to one specific type of European. It is “in the narrative of Amri” that Stanford “[proceeds] to delineate [the base] character of an European West-Indian” (82), and Amri’s views about them cause him to exclaim: “Those are not my countrymen whose inhumanity is the subject of my pages. They may be Britons born, but are not Britons at heart, and I disclaim them.” Amri’s “African tale” is, thus, the vehicle by which sympathetic white men are made to both identify with her hate and use it to “disclaim” or liberate themselves from a monolithic conception of Britishness. This hatred of Creoles is, in turn, transferred to England via Stanford’s body of letters where hate is conveyed as a national virtue. Stanford remarks, “so much for the tale of Amri; read it Charles, and blush for your countrymen” (103). The “blush” of anger, shame, embarrassment, and hate for the Creole is the mark of virtuous indignation and liberated Englishness.

Amri’s “African tale” does not only reproduce a virtuous Englishman free of the stigmas of white colonial ascendancy, it also liberates his thinking about the most hate-filled actions of the worst slaves. After Jack witnesses the deaths of Amri and his best friend, Mahali, at the hands of Europeans, he becomes completely enraged and embarks on a murderous rampage: “Let me pass over the unheard-of-cruelties that succeeded,” Stanford writes, but he briefly indicates that a “poor woman felt the sharpness of [Jack’s] poignard; numbers of innocents fell beneath his rapacious sword, and black men alone were spared” (150). The “poor woman” mentioned is the unnamed white wife of an unnamed white English guard that Jack had formerly killed while escaping from prison. She is fully aware that Jack killed her husband, yet she still seeks him out to offer him help after his mother’s and Mahali’s deaths because she believes Jack is a good man at heart. By including the murder of this English female Samaritan, Stanford dehumanizes Jack, describing him “with all the savage fury of a beast of prey” (149). However, Stanford’s conscious decisions to “pass over the unheard-of-cruelties” that Jack commits, in addition to his terse and unsympathetic depiction of the poor white woman—not even bestowing on her or her husband names or sentimental death scenes50—and his suggestion that Jack’s murderous rampage is reasoned rather than deranged (“European are murdered; “black men alone were spared”) all indicate that active attempts are being made to gloss over Jack’s villainy and deliberately deemphasize its harshness, presumably to uphold Amri’s statement that Jack’s hate-filled behavior is a retaliatory and virtuous, rather than inherently malicious, African characteristic.

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50. See Chapter Two (96–98) for my discussion of the ways in which Edgeworth engages in a similar type of censorship and also appears to gloss over the planters’ heinous colonial behavior.
Like Esther in *The Grateful Negro*, Amri is the “chief instigator”\(^5\) of Jack’s and Stanford’s individual experiences of hatred in Jamaica, and the “African tale” that she delivers is the spark that ignites them both into physical and textual activism. It motivates them both to the actions of fighting and writing with a pointed call to arms: “Now is the time when you should contend for the rights of yourself and mother. Now is the time when you should revenge my cause. You are arrived to maturity, and, to inspire you to revenge my injuries, I will relate the misfortunes of my life” (73). By establishing the notion that Amri’s literal and narrative maternalism produces black and white male activists—sons who, together, mount a challenge against slavery, Earle creatively reforms the representative battle scene first exemplified in *Oroonoko* between the black African woman and the white colonial tyrant.

However, he employs Jack’s African and Stanford’s English hate for much bigger ends than a mere battle against Harrop. Collectively, *Obi*’s hate-filled activism seeks to physically and ideologically undermine the entire framework of slavery. Amri tells Jack: “I beheld you, while yet an infant on my knee, the avenger of Makro’s wrongs . . . and then the idea recurred to my heart: ‘may he not be the saviour of our country!’” (95). From the very beginning of his existence, the hate for Harrop that Amri imparts to her son is infused with the higher aspiration that he will be the African “abolisher of the slave trade!” (95). In addition, the hate for Creoles that she is able to inspire in Stanford also allows for a more nuanced ideological critique of slavery in general. When Stanford exclaims: “who worked [Jack’s] passion to a pitch? Who drove him to the deeds of desperacy and cruelty?” (157), he is not merely taking aim at European West Indians; his rhetorical questions are vague enough to also hold Britain accountable for establishing the institution of slavery that cause Jack and others like him to avenge themselves.

In his *Rights of Man* (1791) response to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Thomas Paine argued that the French Revolution was permissible because it aimed to restore citizen’s natural rights and national interests. One year later, Thomas Clarkson appears to be making the same justification on behalf of the black Jacobins of St. Domingue. Using the language that Paine’s polemic popularized, Clarkson asserts that West Indian insurrections are caused by an inhuman slave trade in which “thousands are annually poured into the Islands, who have been fraudulently and forcibly deprived of the Rights of Men.”\(^5\) In *Obi*, Earle anchors his opposition to colonial slavery in the British Empire using the ideologies of these two


\(^{52}\) *The True State of the Case, Respecting the Insurrection at St. Domingo* (Ipswich: J. Bush, 1792), 3. By St. Domingue I am, of course, referring to the French colony on the Island of Hispanola that became Haiti in 1804.
English men. Stanford’s belief that Jack is a “noble fellow” who “deserves the admiration of all free born men” (112) resonates with Paine’s text; but Stanford’s acceptance of Jack’s hate-filled attempt to dispatch Harrop and dismantle the slave trade justifies violent behavior in the British colonies within the same “Rights of Men” discourse that Clarkson leveled at the men of African descent involved in the 1791 insurrection in St. Domingue. This would have put Earle at major odds with his contemporaries, for the idea that slaves could revolt and determine their own futures, as the Haitian Revolution made evident, was met with horror in England and its colonies.

As David Brion Davis points out: “for numerous whites, the Haitian Revolution reinforced the conviction that emancipation in any form would lead to economic ruin and to the indiscriminate massacre of white populations.”53 Yet, Earle clearly views the idea of violent revolution differently.

Where Paine celebrates the French constitution’s proclamation that “There shall be no titles,” a prohibition by which “nobility is done away, and the peer is exalted into MAN,”54 Earle makes his white protagonist, Stanford, acknowledge and legitimate the violence of the most hate-filled of slaves and exalt this lowly slave figure into “Man.” Through this sympathetic white perspective, Earle merges Clarkson’s ideas about St. Domingue with Paine’s ideas about France to advocate for a revolution from the bottom up that includes those who are seen as beyond the pale of humanity. But rather than replicate this paternalist, French-inspired, ideological notion of revolution from the bottom up in his novel, Earle regenders the ideological focus to make Amri and her “African tale” the stimulus for popular revolutionary action and thought.

As a biological and ideological reproducer of sons who each demonstrate their humanity by vigorously opposing the institution of slavery, Earle aligns Amri’s fictional “African tale” with the polemics that Clarkson and Paine produce. They have a shared hate of tyranny and a belief in freedom that they are prepared to justify to the white paternalist societies in which they exist. In effect, Earle is romanticizing an ideological coalition between a black African mother and two white English fathers wherein sons “themselves, each in his own personal and sovereign right, entered into a compact with each other”55 to justify the freedoms that each of their forebears have brought to light. The “African tale” that Amri narrates to English readers through Stanford’s letters and the Rights of Men polemics that Clarkson and Paine write for Britons are ideological tools that encourage Earle’s fictional and Britain’s real black and white male children to think and act in collective

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55. Ibid., 29.
opposition to tyrannical thought both at home and abroad, thereby making them ideological precursors to Robert Wedderburn’s pamphlet *Axe Laid to the Root* (1817), which, Iain McCalman argues, represents a “sustained attempt to integrate the prospect of slave revolution in the West Indies with that of working-class revolution in England.”

*This is the nature of the radical spirit underpinning Earle’s Obi. He brings together the enlightened white Englishmen Stanford, Clarkson, and Paine and the revolutionary black slaves Amri and Jack as an antislavery family united, not by blood, but by this unique ideological understanding that challenges to contemporary slavery in the British colonies are a unique opportunity to fight for the reestablishment of the essence of British liberty. Their unity is, clearly, an ideological alternative to the ameliorative male coupling for which Edgeworth advocates in *The Grateful Negro.* The dependence and infantalization that benevolent paternalists such as Mr. Edwards encourage in slaves such as Caesar is challenged by the independent maturity that the malevolent maternalist Amri nurtures in Jack and Stanford, who liberate themselves physically and psychologically from the enslavements that consume their peers. In particular, Jack and Stanford’s interracial coupling challenges the soft, strategic voice of paternal tyranny and its ameliorative call by presenting an alternative voice that loudly calls for revolution as the viable end black and white leaders should be working toward. And unlike Edgeworth’s “chief instigator” of violence, Esther, Amri instigates violence *in conjunction with* white men rather than *in opposition to* them. In this way, Earle breathes new life into the idea of black female activism in the decade of the 1790s, creating a fictional black slave woman who is connected to the Rights of Man discourse and who nurtures others to revolt against the status quo in support of an ideal of freedom that *all* Britons, and not just African women, should hold dear. This, in itself, is a radical proposition in 1800. For as Cecelia Green notes, even as late as 1816, “outright abolitionism, which stressed the inherent inhumanity of slavery and the natural right to freedom of the enslaved, was still the purview of a few radicals among whites, including some liberal intellectuals, political firebrands, and religious groups like the Quakers, who, since 1761, had taken a principled stance against the trafficking in human flesh.”

Stanford calls Amri “self-deluded” (105) for having the temerity to think that she and her son can overthrow the entire institution of slavery. Yet, he also twice refers to her as the “heroic woman” (120, 147) because of her valiant resistance to slavery. It is this heroism that Earle vindicates at the end

56. Horrors of Slavery, 18.
of Amri’s life by giving it a religious validation that is designed to elevate her from the common African woman she is to the Imoinda-esque heroine she will be. Amri sends prayers to the “God of Africa, [to] hear it, revenge” (76), and her father, Feraurue, is an Obi man (97), who gives Jack the “Obi horn” which she “herself slung . . . round [Jack’s] neck” (105) as he embarks on his quest to avenge her, yet Amri’s connections to the occult practice of obeah do not affect her credibility as a heroine. Neither does her ambiguous practice of Christianity. Following her conversion in Africa, Stanford remarks that Amri “sent up prayers to heaven for the protection of her son” (116), yet she also “blessed the Almighty providence that protected” (117) Harrop so that she would be able to satiate her vengeance on him. Again, this mixture of sincere and vengeful Judeo-Christian worship presents no contradiction in Stanford’s estimation of her. As soon as she physically expires, he writes, “Heaven received her amidst a choir of angels” (148). Amri’s swift and immediate ascent to heaven upon her death despite her conflicting religious prayers and practices effectively canonizes this malevolent maternalist for her heroic efforts against slavery, confirms that she is a martyr for the cause of freedom, and consolidates the impression of her as a saint-mother created in “Imoinda’s shade.”

TOGETHER, the rebel-wife, Ada, and the saint-mother, Amri, resurrect elements of Oroonoko’s Imoinda, elevate the role that the common black African slave woman plays in attacking slavery, and move the antislavery debate into the radical realms of immigration and gynecological rebellion. However, despite being politically astute, socially conscious, and surprisingly progressive treatments of antislavery, both texts have schizophrenic endings that bring conservative elements from the altered Oroonoko back to the fore.

Ada’s representation as the rebel-wife advocating for a literal form of freedom through marriage and immigration is undermined by a second, alternative ending to Kotzebue’s play. The very last scene of the final act is divided into two halves of the page. I have already analyzed the top half, in which William gives up half his inheritance to liberate Ada and enables her and her husband to depart for Europe and freedom. However, on the bottom half of the page, Kotzebue presents an alternate ending in which Zameo executes Ada, loses his senses, and kills himself with grief. In shock and disbelief, John, William, and Paul stare down at Zameo’s dead body, and William, overcome with grief at two needless African deaths, “hastily advances towards John,” screaming, “Curse upon thee, Murderer!” “The curtain falls.”

Clearly, the tragic murder-suicide of this ideal African couple fulfills the Oroonoko-esque plot that Kotzebue had meticulously crafted up to this point.
However, the idea that African emancipation can only be achieved through death makes this ending more dissatisfying and less progressive than the first because it stimulates the emotions of viewers and readers alike, as my earlier discussion of Roscoe’s poem pointed out, without providing either of them an opportunity to reflect on their contemporary involvement with the problem of slavery or to imagine ex-slaves living within their midst once the drama ends. In addition, the reference to the financial sacrifice Britain must make if it is to support antislavery efforts is also lost in this alternate one, since William is no longer required to lose half his fortune freeing Ada. Instead, William calls John a “murderer” and articulates the same sort of accusation witnessed in Hawkesworth’s and Gentleman’s *Oroonoko*, wherein a Briton points his moral finger at a tyrannical Creole without taking any responsibility for his or his country’s own collusion in the practice of slavery and the deaths of slaves.58

The *Obi* ending is also split into two parts that, together, show a distinct ideological parallel with the 1760 anonymous version of *Oroonoko*. Earle’s first tragic ending involves Jack’s valiant yet unsuccessful battle against three black adversaries, Quashee, Sam, and an unnamed boy. Stanford laments, “Thus died as great a man as ever graced the annals of history, basely murdered by the hirelings of Government” (157), a statement that vividly evokes echoes of Oroonoko’s death at the hands of the Irishman, Bannister, and the rest of the British militia in Behn’s novella. Like Oroonoko, Jack dies without successfully overthrowing the slave society that oppressed him, but he does manage to fulfill his father’s and mother cause. Prior to his death, Jack had successfully kidnapped “the wretched Harrop” (119); but once Jack is killed, Harrop is left alone in the cave where Jack imprisoned him, and he eventually dies of hunger.

Harrop’s death also facilitates another, decidedly more positive, ending that involves William Sebald, the young white man whom Harrop cheated in order to marry the Jamaican heiress, Harriet. Harrop’s death paves the way for the reunion of these thwarted lovers, who have also suffered because of Harrop’s villainy. Stanford’s last line of the novel notes that “William Sebald and Harriet were at length united, and have for many years enjoyed the sweets of a happy union” (158). Directly after Jack is killed, Earle suggests that this married couple becomes part of the new, presumably enlightened ruling class in Jamaica since their own experiences with Harrop will make them more sympathetic to the misfortunes of black slaves oppressed by similar tyrants. This view of a new, enlightened, and sympathetic white Jamaican leadership brings to mind the similarly enlightened white Creoles, Maria and...

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58. See Chapter One, 60–61, 63.
Blandford, from the anonymous version of *Oroonoko*, whose marriage at the end of that play also inferred that they are dedicated to ameliorating rather than liberating slaves from slavery. 59 William and Harriet’s marriage and the continued productivity of their union suggest that a similar move to understand but not liberate Africans is being made. In this new sympathetic era of Jamaican paternalism at the end of *Obi*, efforts to ameliorate slavery have intensified under a sympathetic white Creole society but not to the extent of overthrowing the institution or completely emancipating Africans.

Thus, the endings of *Obi* and *The Negro Slaves* still contain the same echoes of conservatism about slavery that *Oroonoko* and its altered versions never managed to overcome. Despite their use of common black African women who advocate radical ideas about freedom that are more expansive than *Oroonokus* of the past, both texts still seem to be ultimately trapped in the *Oroonoko* mold and message. In Part Two of this book I discuss the texts that can actually overcome this dilemma, transcend the *Oroonoko* mold, and use fictional black women as abolitionist advocates in England. But as colonial fictions, *Obi* and *The Negro Slaves* must be remembered for two things: first, for their use of the fictional rebel-wife and the saint-mother at a time in the antislavery movement where the concerns of these common black African women are usually forgotten, overlooked, or ignored, to promote radical solutions to the problem of slavery that were well outside the mainstream; and second, the fact that the common black slave woman’s freedom is, ultimately, just as elusive for them as it was for Imoinda. For this reason, *Obi* and *The Negro Slaves* mark the point in British literature where Imoinda’s literal influence has, perhaps, reached the zenith of effectiveness in championing antislavery. Since the idea of freedom is not completely achievable in the British colonies, “Imoinda’s shade” needs to move overseas in search of full emancipation—to places where freedom is more of a possibility and where women of African descent are actively involved in petitioning for it. Places like England, and women like Cubba, Savanna, and Olivia Fairfield.

59. See Chapter One, 68.