Imoinda's Shade
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Well! I am really haunted by black shadows . . . a black Lady, covered with finery, in the Pit at the Opera . . .

—Hester Thrale, “Letter to Mrs. Pennington,” No. 5 George St., Manchester Square, Saturday, June 19, 1808, *The Letters of Mrs. Thrale* (1926), 143

The story of Imoinda as a story of a strong woman who went through immense tragedy through her life . . . really resonated with many of our young women in the school, not only in terms of their identity as young women and young women of colour, but . . . the last scene . . . where, as Imoinda is giving birth she’s also debating her own suicide and struggling with these *big* questions, we actually had a couple of young women in the core class that had faced some of these difficult issues of teenage pregnancy and whether or not to keep their children; And . . . because of school policies, because of other things having to do with urban education, there are relatively few venues for those girls to explore that part of their life . . . with adults . . . in a safe environment. I tell you, when we set the conceptual framework for that last scene, several girls who during the rest of the project had been very antagonistic to the process and very difficult to deal with from a behavior standpoint, they took the lead on that scene and it was so powerful, and of course, they never had to open up to the group and tell them that this was their story because they could explore their own experience through Imoinda’s voice and therefore step forward and make a *huge* artistic contribution to that final scene . . .

—Glenn L. McClure¹

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¹. Response during question-and-answer section of one-day conference “Critical Perspectives on Imoinda,” http://www.gold.ac.uk/wow/shortvideo2/. Glen McClure is a composer who teaches at the State University of New York at Geneseo.
I’m teaching a class on Caribbean literature and its diasporas. I just wanted to make an observation . . . when I saw Imoinda on the stage there at the school it . . . came across to me very strongly then, of course it was a wonderful moment of detachment . . . it was a very very luxurious moment, believe me, being able to see this. But it came across . . . so obviously now . . . as a text of the Diaspora. Because what I saw inscribed in your performance . . . it came across very much as an American piece . . . whereas . . . in my head it was a Caribbean piece, and of course it was meant to function—it is a diasporic text, but what I was able to do seeing it in that context was to see it placed elsewhere, it should . . . [someone] asked earlier about when it’s going to go to Brazil . . .

—Joan Anim-Addo

ON NOVEMBER 7, 2009, Goldsmiths, University of London presented a one-day seminar titled “Words from Other Worlds: Critical Perspectives on Imoinda.” A promotional poster for this seminar states that it was a student-led initiative seeking “to develop a range of critical perspectives on the silenced female Imoinda in Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko,”3 using, as a context, a rewriting of Behn’s novella by Joan Anim-Addo entitled Imoinda: or, She Who Will Lose Her Name. A Play for Twelve Voices in Three Acts (2007). The very fact that this seminar bases itself in Behn’s work and yet reconstructs Imoinda as a completely independent manifestation of Anim-Addo’s imagination confirms that the eighteenth-century process of imoindaisnam that I have outlined in this book is currently ongoing. Imoinda is an explicit indication that contemporary writers such as Anim-Addo and Biyi Bandele (who produced Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko [1999] for the Royal Shakespeare Company) continue to ground themselves in, yet distinguish themselves from, Behn, Southerne, and their texts.

For a number of reasons, Anim-Addo’s textual engagement with Oroonoko offers, perhaps, the most explicit example of the type of creative detachment that this book has articulated as a facet of imoindaisnam. First, her prominent use of the “Imoinda” name in her title speaks deliberately to a contemporary need to detach this fictional African heroine from the “Oroonoko” name under which she originally appeared. Second, Anim-Addo’s Imoinda is a libretto—opera being a curious choice for a revisionist slave narrative, but one that firmly distinguishes Anim-Addo’s text from the novella and trigomicomedy drama that initially established Imoinda as a literary presence. Third, Anim-Addo, a Grenadian native with an African name who resides and works as a writer and academic in Britain, explicitly identifies herself

as a woman of the African Diaspora, an identity that is markedly different from the English origins of Behn and Southerne. As is her creative work, which Anim-Addo also identifies as equally detached from national borders. After being developed in English theater readings and workshops from 1996, *Imoinda* was published first as a bilingual English–Italian edition in 2003, and it received an American performance at School of the Arts (SOTA) in Rochester, New York, in 2007. Anim-Addo’s comments in the third epigram indicate that she is even looking toward Brazil as another place for its future production.

*Imoinda*’s international circulation continues to publicize this fictional African woman’s story, and as Glen McClure’s comments in the second epigram point out, *Imoinda* allows others to reflect on some aspect of love in contemporary society. For those young women who were a part of McClure’s student production at SOTA, the play was an opportunity for them to scrutinize their own reproductive choices in a curriculum that does not let them speak about such concerns, and McClure suggests that they use that scrutiny to make a positive creative statement about themselves. This kind of imoindaisms represents one way in which Behn’s and Southerne’s heroine continues to be reconstructed and employed to suit the current needs of a new generation. But its translation into other languages also means that this African woman’s experience is also being reinterpreted to suit the needs of other cultures, providing them with the creative space to speak about, reflect on, and act out their own unique concerns in their own specific tongues. That such a concerted attempt is being made to understand, view, and popularize Imoinda in her own right implies that this fictional African woman’s influence has, perhaps, reached a transformative moment of recognition at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The current moment seems right, therefore, for a book that seeks to reclaim the African Imoinda by considering how evocations of this fictional African woman have been employed in eighteenth-century British literature. To this end, this book has established a deliberate trajectory. Part One of *Imoinda’s Shade* demonstrates that writers from the mid-to-late eighteenth century use the *Oroonoko* marriage plots from Aphra Behn’s novel and Thomas Southerne’s drama as bases for their own fictions in which they develop representations of African heroines who are involved in making deliberate interventions into antislavery activism. Even though the 1760 anonymous *Oroonoko* and Edgeworth’s *The Grateful Negro* market amelioration as a progressive, reasonable, and benevolent course of action in the colonies, I read the white African, Imoinda, and the black African, Clara, as fictional figures whose representations and marriages do not only call into question the adequacy of this policy, but expose its extreme inadequacy by
laying bare the sexual and paternal tyranny against African women that an ameliorist regime enacts. Earle’s Amri and Kotzebue’s Ada resurrect the spirit of the black African Imoinda and privilege the African romance in order to present radical alternatives to amelioration in the forms of gynecological rebellion and immigration. Yet, despite the progressive ways in which these fictional African heroines are employed, their texts ultimately point to the ascendance of the *Oroonoko* legend and its insistence on the African heroine’s death. In other words, *The Negro Slaves* and *Obi; or, the History of Three Fingered Jack* do not allow readers to observe their progressive black heroines achieving the freedom that Imoinda is an advocate for.

To address this need, Part Two of *Imoinda’s Shade* focuses on narratives that eschew the *Oroonoko* text and legend but still make politicized interventions into the marriage plots of British dramas and novels in ways that show fictional African women continuing to advance antislavery as well as post-slavery discourse. These fictional women present three different approaches to the idea of abolition in England. In Macready’s *Irishman in London*, Cubba represents abolition as a humorous yet politicized expression of complete relief from the pain of slavery that she advocates for all people in the colonies and accesses for herself through her “happy” marriage to Delany. A coupling between two kinds of victimized activists also appears to be one of the focuses of Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray*. But when Savanna’s role as a member of the black poor is compared with Adeline’s role as a radical white woman advocating for the abolition of marriage, Opie looks more triumphantly on the legal credibility of the mulatto woman’s role in the novel’s English society. For Savanna, abolition is about the legal freedom to be seen as a black British “street citizen” in a society in which the black poor were disparaged as socially transgressive and foreign, and shipped abroad accordingly. Being shipped abroad is also an experience familiar to Olivia Fairfield, who arrives in England from Jamaica under the terms of an arranged marriage orchestrated by her father’s will. Although its stipulations initially involve this mulatto heiress in a biological process of whitening, the anonymous author involves her in an alternative marriage plot that shows this woman actively resisting her father’s attempts to abolish her existence as a heroine of African descent. For Olivia, abolition is about confronting her father’s bloodline—a confrontation in which she ultimately triumphs by her active resistance to the abolitionist terms that this paternalist’s literal and figurative wills seek to enforce from beyond the grave.

In these ways, *Imoinda’s Shade* uses marriage plots to establish a trajectory for reading the fictional African woman’s involvement in advancing antislavery and abolitionist positions in British literature. It also develops our understanding of how women were responsible for the changing perception
of African-ness in the eighteenth century. From its initial start as a concept fluid enough to accommodate whiteness in Southerne’s *Oroonoko*, African-ness is disparaged for its primitivism in Edgeworth’s *The Grateful Negro* and celebrated for its purity in Kotzebue’s *The Negro Slaves*, in Earle’s *Obi; or, The History of Three Fingered Jack*, and even in Macready’s *The Irishman in London; or, The Happy African*. When people of African descent are depicted in the pages of dramas and novels that are set in England, African-ness appears to settle into an uneasy yet reconcilable association with Britishness in the characterizations of black Creole women such as Cubba and Savanna, implying that, for at least the working class, Africans can be silently integrated into British society as street citizens. But African-ness appears to be most threatening when it is embodied in a character like Olivia Fairfield, a woman who identifies equally with members of the white upper-middle class as well as the black people associated slavery. In her tale, this fictional woman of color demonstrates that she can perform all of the admirable characteristics associated with Englishness—propriety, temperance, humility, religious fervor—as well as, and sometimes better than, white English women. Like the “black Lady, covered with finery, in the Pit at the Opera” who so alarms Hester Thrale in the first epigram of this afterword, Olivia’s presence in British literature creates the impression that the negative stigmas routinely ascribed to people of African descent are unreliable, and thus, the “wall of separation . . . within England” that had safely divided black from white” is swiftly “crumbling,” as Felicity Nussbaum puts it. Consequently, although Vincent Carretta asserts that Olaudah Equiano is “African by birth . . . British by acculturation and choice” but “can . . . never be English,” Olivia’s presence speaks to the possibility that a concept of African Englishness is a closer reality than most eighteenth-century Britons imagine.

In drama—a genre that has been noticeably underutilized in critical discussions of British antislavery literature when compared with poetry and prose fiction—the women of “Imoinda’s shade” have also been employed to bring out the resonance of antislavery and abolitionist activism contained within the pages of published texts rather than staged performances. The fictional African women in the anonymous *Oroonoko* (1760), *The Negro Slaves*, and *The Irishman in London; or, The Happy African* differ widely with respect to race, class, genre, and function. Yet, together, these dramas account for the wide diversity of ways that the African woman was constructed on the published page as a speaking subject, not in the highly stylized language of poetry, but in dialogically politicized language that was written expressly to

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connect with, and influence, British audiences as well as readers. Whether their African heroines speak in Standard or Jamaican English, British dramatists are as involved in making readers read for the antislavery meaning contained with their texts as they are responsible for allowing spectators to look at African bodies onstage for pleasure.

In privileging the words spoken by fictional African characters rather than the portrayals of their bodies as they were performed by whites in British theatres, *Imoinda's Shade* makes a case for the importance of understanding antislavery activism as a reading rather than an acting enterprise, an idea that is supported in the prose fictions of Earle, Edgeworth, Opie, and *The Woman of Colour’s* anonymous author. Perhaps to distinguish their efforts from the tawdry rubric “novels,” and to claim some kind of moral legitimacy for their creations, it is noticeable that all of these writers consciously identify their works in total or in part as “tales” or histories. “The narrator in *Tristram Shandy,*” Miriam Wallace observes, “argued that good reading is less for the pleasure of the plot and more for self education and reflection,” and it appears that the writers of antislavery tales and historical dramas understood this distinction. They were able to produce two levels of discourse in their works that accommodate both kinds of reader, and the women of “Imoinda’s shade” are associated with the level that corresponds to edification and reflection about the issues of slavery and freedom.

Reading Imoinda’s literal and imaginative presences throughout a series of eighteenth-century texts also provides a working methodology that can account for a writer’s views on antislavery and abolition at a time when extant information about their actual opinions on these issues is not available. This methodology provides a gauge for assessing how far British writers were willing to go in conveying the ideal of freedom. When focused on the colonies, the women of “Imoinda’s shade” are employed to run the gamut of positions on antislavery and abolition, ranging from amelioration in the 1760 anonymous *Oroonoko* to the Jacobin notion of popular and violent revolt in Earle’s *Obi.* However, this range is not always as progressive as it seems, or could be. As Edgeworth’s depiction of Clara shows, not all British writers who evoke Imoinda are progressively in favor of giving Africans complete liberty, and in general, texts that are set in the West Indian colonies have a hard time imagining the black African woman experiencing freedom there. The fictional women of African descent who are depicted on English shores, however, offer more extensive examples of a lived kind of freedom by their access to interracial marriages and British rights, their recognition as British subjects, their involvement in plots that circumvent the Yorke—

Talbot tradition and advocate for the African’s humanity, as well as texts that align with the Mansfield myth of immediate freedom for slaves in England or undermine stigmas of race prejudice and social degeneration that plague the African body. In all, these diverse depictions of Africans being legally, racially, and emotionally liberated in England from the stigmas associated with slavery speak to one of the ways in which British writers used the African woman to propagandize the nation’s love of, and commitment to, freedom. Events such as the Mansfield Judgment and the Sierra Leone scheme, however, confirm that this propaganda is not as ideal as its literature suggests. While Britain might have reveled in the self-righteousness of freedom for all within its borders, it did not actively work to provide legal safeguards for all its figures of empire who lived there, and as Olivia Fairfield’s example shows, skin-color prejudice in England was still a reality even for the most idealized women of color. But this type of propaganda does work to morally distinguish Britons from white Creoles in the run-up to the abolitions of the slave trade and slavery, and it also promotes England as a haven for blacks—a haven that nineteenth-century black women such as Mary Seacole and Mary Prince would continue to market in their respective narratives.

These fictional women are also a testament to the concerted effort made within British culture to keep Behn’s and Southerne’s names and texts alive long after their authors’ deaths. The women who fall under “Imoinda’s shade” and the texts that embody them speak to the longevity and necessity of the “Oroonoko legend,” as Wylie Sypher calls it, and they also create an understanding as to why the nineteenth-century poet Algernon Swinburne can speak so knowledgeably about Behn as the first literary abolitionist. Works such as The Negro Slaves and the many revisions of Oroonoko keep alive the themes and issues that Behn and Southerne originated. And, moreover, this book has also shown that texts such as The Irishman in London, Adeline Mowbray, and The Woman of Colour keep Imoinda’s spirit alive through their literal and imaginative reinventions of African heroines who continue to raise concerns particular to enslaved women of African descent by scrutinizing Britain’s involvement in slavery, as well as the nation’s attitude toward the citizenship rights of, and prejudices against, African figures of empire.

Last, in the absence of an abundance of texts written by black women, the women of “Imoinda’s shade” offer an opportunity to reflect on the concerns of the slave woman—but only as effectively or ineffectively as a white writer’s imagination created them. These concerns are numerous: rape, rebellion, violence, citizenship, reproduction, interracial marriage, social trans-

7. Sypher, Guinea’s Captive Kings, 108.
To evoke these concerns, the fictional African woman’s body is used in a multitude of ways: she is a fighter, a saint-mother, a rebel-wife, a political comedian, a primitive African, a rich mulatto heiress, and a black British street citizen. In short, by focusing on the African women and the British marriage plots that incorporate their experiences, this book brings to light Britain’s engagement with slavery and freedom from a particular fictional woman’s perspective. The names Clara, Amri, Ada, Cloe, Quasheba, Cubba, Savanna, Dido, and Olivia are one manifestation of the women who fall under “Imoinda’s shade,” and together they form an important part of a historical trajectory that begins with Behn and Southerne, and ends (for now) with Anim-Addo’s *Imoinda*. 