The Path to Morality and the Death of True Honor

What is the path to morality? Throughout history, the answer to this question has been seemingly unanimous: religion. The idea of faith and religion as the only sufficient means of moral acuity has been rooted in society through the years, just as it was during the time of Aphra Behn. In her story *Oroonoko: or, The Royal Slave*, she seeks not only to challenge religion as the answer for the path to morality, she also challenges the religious system as a whole. She presents a society without religion and the strong code of honor that serves in its place. From this place emerges her main character: Prince Oroonoko. She uses his belief system to critique the system of religion in society by focusing on each system’s use of labels and their treatment of honor. In the clashing of these conflicting views, Behn brings to light a sobering point about society and religion’s seemingly inadequate role in fashioning honorable men. In comparing and contrasting autonomy and religion and the different versions of honor entailed by each system, she comes to a saddening conclusion that goes beyond challenging the path to morality; it changes history’s unanimous answer to this pressing question that has seemingly been etched in stone.

The first part of Behn’s story paints Oroonoko’s homeland Coramantien as an Eden or paradise that is untainted by religion. The narrator seems in awe of the society and claims that the people represented “an absolute idea of the first state of innocence, before man knew how to sin” (Behn 145). Sin necessitates redemption, which religion offers as a belief system that forgives such transgressions. However, in the absence of sin or the recognition of sin, religion is
unnecessary. “…religion would here but destroy that tranquility they possess by ignorance, and laws would but teach them to now offence, of which now they have no notion” (Behn 145). The narrator seems to envy the innocence of the people and through her lamentation she is criticizing the equivalent system in her own society, namely religion. In the absence of religion, autonomy reigns and personal honor serves to maintain the order among men. Out of this Eden-like society emerges a man who is the product of his society and who embodies honor-driven morality: Oroonoko. In the words of Pigg, “He becomes synonymous with the action and thought processes which he embodies” (Pigg). His character, as this representative, serves as a foil to the Eurocentric way of thinking that guides the narration in an effort to contrast the system of religion in Europe the system of honor in Oroonoko’s homeland. Her characters serve as representations of their society and “cannot be classified into concrete categories. Instead, they hover between extremes” (Rosefeld 24). Not only do the characters represent ideas of their society, they represent the extremities of these ideas. The best and worst sides of the spectrum are set side by side for comparison. In this comparison, Behn provides a challenge to the European system of religion, which she places at the worst end of the spectrum, and Oroonoko’s system of beliefs, which resides on the opposite end.

After the establishment of the utopian society of the Coramantien natives, the narrator highlights the European obsession with titles above all else while showing the conflicting values of Oroonoko’s society. The story carries with it a racist undertone that highlights the European way of thinking. As the narrator observes Oroonoko, she first describes his manner by saying, “…and ‘twas amazing to imagine where it was he learned so much humanity or… where ‘twas he got that real greatness of soul, those defined notions of true honour…” (Behn 146). She goes on to answer her own question and claims that such things must have been gleaned from his
contact with European culture and people, specifically a French tutor. Oroonoko is labeled by this society as savage because of his origins. They consider his people to be of a barbaric race and, as such, incapable of these favorable traits. Therefore, the justification is that such honorable traits were learned through contact with “civilized” people. The narrator continues to justify her glorification of this “savage” by setting him apart from his race through creative description. “His face was not of that brown, rusty black which most of that nation are, but a perfect ebony… His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat” (Behn 147). By making the character sound more European, he earns the label of an honorable man because a member of European society can be assumed to be honorable.

Coramantian has a different system by which honor is earned instead of assigned; it is seen rather than assumed. The narrator conveys this in her observation of their leader: “Those on that continent where I was, had no kind; but the oldest war captain was obeyed with great resignation” (Behn 145). This would have been a man who had served them successfully in battle and in this honorable behavior; he has earned his place in society and the veneration of his constituents. There is no label assigned because of his connections or statements of belief. He has proved himself honorable in battle and has earned the title of an honorable man. The clash of the two systems occurs when Oroonoko converses with the ship captain. Oroonoko requests to be relieved his bonds and free to move around the ship. The captain will not grant his request for fear the prince will seek revenge on his captors. However, Oroonoko then claims he will “engage his honour to behave himself…” (Behn 158). This oath on his honor fails to convince his captor who “could not resolve to trust a heathen… upon his parole, a man that had no sense or notion of the God that he worshipped” (Behn 159). He labels the prince as a savage in the sense that he is devoid of religion. This leads him to the conclusion that Oroonoko is not to be trusted because
without religion, a person cannot be morally sound or truthful. This reveals more about the labeling process in European society by stating that it not only assigns honor on the basis of one’s background and place in society; it assigns trustworthiness on the basis of one’s religious beliefs or lack of such beliefs. The captain calls the prince a savage and, as such, deems him incapable of such “religious” qualities as trustworthiness.

Oroonoko further condemns the religious labeling system in his reply to the captain concerning their different opinions on honor and religion. The captain was said to have “protested on him upon the word of a Christian, and sworn in the name of a great God, which if he should violate, he would expect eternal torment in the world to come” (Behn 159). In this statement, the crewmembers are viewing the word of the captain as more of a binding contract than the word of Oroonoko. This illustrates religion itself as a general system of “rewards and punishments” where the fear of punishment promotes initially evil men to do good and the promise of rewards makes good men even better. Oroonoko sees this as a poor system by which to govern one’s actions by stating that the captain’s punishment for a broken word would be reserved for the afterlife and would be a very private matter. This causes him to see the Christian faith in a different light and observes “its powerlessness to make people just, brave or honest” (“‘Little Religion’ but ‘Admirable Morals’” 266). This “rewards and punishment” system does not suffice as a means of promoting such traits. He provides the means of correcting such a system in the presentation of his own code of honor by stating, “Let him know I swear by my honour, which to violate, would…render me contemptible and despised by all brave and honest men… It would be eternally offending and diseasing all mankind…” (Behn 159). He is stating that his punishment would be immediate in that his honor would forever be wounded. This highlights a key difference in their belief systems: Oroonoko’s society views honor as something
that must be earned and can be lost while European society sees it as a label that remains despite offending or contradictory actions. This brings to light the issue of accountability. For the captain, accountability seems to await him in the next life awarded by religion, whereas Oroonoko’s accountability extends to the present and is therefore more binding.

In the absence of immediate accountability and the presence of a society focused on labels rather than actions, duplicity becomes commonplace. When the narrator first encounters the people of Coramantien, she recounts the story of an English governor who encountered the people. The people had to ask “what name they had for a man who promised a thing he did not do” (Behn 145). They were unfamiliar with the term “liar” because not keeping one’s word was a foreign idea to them. An honorable man keeps his word, without exception, in order to remain honorable and reputable. Without the necessity of labels, a man is defined by action and is assigned honor only when it is earned. However, the religious men break their word in the story and Oroonoko is baffled by this phenomenon. The most prominent example is when he surrenders himself to the governor on the promise that he would be treated civilly in his surrender. However, upon arrival at the plantation, he is taken and brutally beaten, further proving that the label of civilized or religious does not immediately assign one the quality of being honorable or trustworthy.

The realization that religion is insufficient as a system of regulation for human action comes all too late for Oroonoko, further serving Behn’s critique of Christianity. The noble prince realizes the duplicity of his Christian captors and attempts to free his people and return to paradise. However, his people abandon his him and his cause. He condemns them as people “who were by nature slaves” (Behn 172). They have succumbed to the labeling system of “civilized” society. Society has deemed them simply slaves without honor and that is what
Oroonoko thinks they have become. Honorable men such as Oroonoko would rather die than live under men who are considered faithless, untrustworthy, and superficial. In this sense, his words can “be seen as symptomatic of the psychology of honor—a regard for human dignity rooted not in compassion, but in pride” (“Royalism and Honor” 498). In this defining moment, amongst the abandonment of his people, Oroonoko realizes he is on the losing end. His system cannot survive with him as its sole participant and, in effect, this point marks the beginning of his demise while illustrating true honor’s inability to survive amongst the current society. This cements Behn’s criticism of Christianity and her views on autonomy and honor. In his death, she shows that true honor rooted in pride and one’s own moral code has no place in society.

To embalm her message, Behn’s gives a gruesomely detailed account of Oroonoko’s death that seems abrupt and unwarranted in the story. The sanctioned hanging for treason is replaced with an unexpected display of savagery. However, when Oroonoko is viewed as a martyr, the savagery, which should simply abhor the audience, evokes a different effect. Cynthia Richards makes a good observation about this scene: “By reframing the scene as one of martyrdom… the scene does not so much reproduce the violence it represents as transcend it” (Richards 652). When viewed as a death for his beliefs, Oroonoko’s demise, rather than being a horrific display of punishment, serves to highlight the injustice of such treatment and to further incriminate and criticize his Christian captors. The savagery depicted also serves as a stark contrast to the Eden-like picture at the beginning of the story. His death illustrates the inability to return to paradise. After the introduction of religion and its system of rewards and punishments, one cannot return to the state of Eden, where sin goes unrecognized. Oroonoko has seen the duplicity that man is capable of and this realization has made him distrustful of other people. If he had returned to his homeland, this suspicion would have remained and his state of mind
would never have been the same. Therefore, he chooses to die for his beliefs and serve as a symbol of true honor. In his death, Aphra Behn challenges religion as a system. Oroonoko himself says that while Christians “professed so much, none performed so little” (Behn 172). She is pointing out religious hypocrisy and challenges the idea that religion leads to or implies honor. In the final death of Oroonoko, Behn is lamenting the death of true honor in a society driven by labels rather than the measure of an individual.

Behn’s tragic tale comes to a sad conclusion in an effort to critique religion as a functional and efficient system in society. She has revealed the so-called “land of savages” to be Eden and the world of civilized men to be the only one capable of true savagery in the end. She reveals the cause of this difference to be the conflicting belief systems. She criticizes the labeling system of European society on the basis of origin and religion. She shows the dangers of a society that assigns honor rather than allowing it to be earned. The superficiality and duplicity of such a society can be seen in her work as Oroonoko seems to rise above all else to bring forth the example of true honor. Behn is challenging and disproving the attitude in European society, which was deeply embedded in the Christian faith, that religion is the only path to refinement and moral acuity. However, Oroonoko’s demise also serves as a message to European society. Just as he was unable to return to paradise, the European people cannot go back to this system of belief and honor because they have already subjected themselves to the religious practices of society. Therefore, while there seems to be another path to moral acuity, it seems that it has been lost to society. This transforms her work from a work of criticism that might pose a solution to simply a eulogy for true honor and the failure of current society to produce men with honorable traits born from autonomy such as those of Oroonoko.
Works Cited


