

# Oroonoko PDF (Limited Copy)

Thomas Southerne



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# **Oroonoko Summary**

"A Tragic Tale of Love and Betrayal in Colonialism"

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## About the book

Written as a stage adaptation of Aphra Behn's groundbreaking novel, *\*Oroonoko\** by Thomas Southerne artfully breathes life into themes of love, betrayal, and freedom against the backdrop of colonialism and the inescapable bonds of slavery. This poignant play follows the captivating journey of Oroonoko, a princely African warrior whose nobility and valor are tested by the cruel tides of European greed and deceit. As Oroonoko grapples with the heart-wrenching clash between his unwavering love for Imoinda and the harsh realities of a society poised to strip him of all honor, Southerne invites readers into a world where human dignity labors under chains yet refuses to be extinguished. The storytelling entices with intricately woven relationships and political intrigue, presenting a savory feast of moral questions on equality and humanity—a timeless reflection that resonates with fervent poignancy today.

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## About the author

Thomas Southerne, born in 1660 in Oxmantown near Dublin, Ireland, was a prominent playwright of the Restoration period, celebrated for his adept ability to adapt existing narratives into poignant theatrical works. Initially destined for a career in law, Southerne's passion for the arts led him to London where he soon made a name for himself within the vibrant theatre scene. His literary prowess is marked most notably by his adaptation of Aphra Behn's novella, "Oroonoko," transforming it into a successful tragedy that resonated with audiences due to its exploration of themes like slavery and colonialism. Southerne's works are characterized by their emotional depth and vivid characterization, which combined with his smooth dialogue, captivated audiences and solidified his reputation as a skillful dramatist. Moreover, his plays often reflected the social issues of his time, embedding timeless human dilemmas within a Restoration context that both entertained and provoked thought among viewers. Beyond "Oroonoko," his legacy includes other notable plays such as "The Fatal Marriage," further showcasing his talent that contributed to the evolution of English drama in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.

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# Summary Content List

Chapter 1: Thomas Southerne, Oroonoko: A Tragedy

Chapter 2: Anonymous, The Sexes Mis-match'd; or a New Way

Chapter 3: A Tragedy, As it is now Acted at the Theatre-Royal

Chapter 4: Francis Gentleman, Oroonoko: or the Royal

Chapter 5: Anonymous, Oroonoko, A Tragedy. Altered from

Chapter 6: John Ferriar, The Prince of Angola

Chapter 7: Hannah More, Slavery, a Poem

Chapter 8: Thomas Bellamy, The Benevolent Planters

Chapter 9: 'Biyi Bandele, Aphra Behn's Oroonoko in a new

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# Chapter 1 Summary: Thomas Southerne, Oroonoko: A Tragedy

## Summary of Thomas Southerne's "Oroonoko: A Tragedy"

### ### Background

Thomas Southerne, an Irish-born playwright, entered the world of theater under the guidance of poet laureate John Dryden. He engaged deeply with the political tensions of his time, notably through works like "The Loyal Brother," which reflected his Tory leanings. After a brief military career, Southerne returned to drama, finding success with plays such as "The Fatal Marriage." His adaptation of Aphra Behn's "Oroonoko" is perhaps his most enduring work, demonstrating his stride in tragicomedy by weaving a serious narrative of exploitation and betrayal with elements of humor.

### ### Chapter Summaries

#### #### Act I, Scene 1

Charlott Welldon persuades her sister Lucy to leave London and seek husbands in the American colonies. Disguised as a man, Charlott navigates the gender roles of the period, arranging advantageous marriages and financial dealings. They engage with Widow Lackitt, who is on the lookout for a new husband following the death of her wealthy spouse, offering





comedic elements as Charlott outmaneuvers societal expectations.

#### #### Act I, Scene 2

The lieutenant governor of Surinam and Blanford, his friend, discuss Oroonoko, a captive African prince sold into slavery. Despite his noble birth, Oroonoko is brought low by betrayal but retains his dignity and leadership qualities. The play begins to explore themes of colonial exploitation and the contrast between European and African values.

#### #### Act II

Widow Lackitt orchestrates the marriage of her son Daniel to Lucy, which Charlott encourages under the guise of familial duty. The Widow's overt pursuit of Charlott (believed to be her sister's brother) introduces humor and deception while highlighting gender dynamics. In parallel, Blanford encourages Oroonoko, promising noble treatment despite his enslavement, setting the stage for Oroonoko's internal conflict between acceptance and resistance.

#### #### Act III

Aboan, Oroonoko's fellow slave, appeals to him to lead a rebellion against their captors. Oroonoko is tempted but resists, unwilling to embrace the violence that would mirror their oppressors' cruelty. The juxtaposition of Oroonoko's moral compass with the freedom struggle opens a deep examination of leadership and integrity under duress.





#### #### Act IV

Oroonoko ultimately resolves to plan an escape, inspired by both a desire for freedom and reunion with his beloved Imoinda. Meanwhile, Charlott's schemes advance, securing financial and romantic liaisons for her sister and herself, showcasing the art of negotiation and subterfuge.

#### #### Act V

The rebellion begins, transitioning from hope to tragedy. Oroonoko's efforts are betrayed, leading to an emotional climax where he and Imoinda choose death over degradation. This act starkly contrasts the moral decay of colonial authorities with Oroonoko's nobility, culminating in a poignant critique of imperialism and racial prejudice.

### **Characters & Themes**

Southerne's narrative is driven by Oroonoko's tragic journey from a prince to a martyr—a commentary on slavery and colonialism. The comedy subplot involving Charlott and Lucy provides a counterbalance, using gender disguise to critique societal norms. Southerne's adaptation remains impactful, highlighting themes of identity, betrayal, and the enduring strength of love and honor amidst oppression.



## Critical Thinking

**Key Point:** Moral Integrity in Leadership

**Critical Interpretation:** In Act III of "Oroonoko," as Aboan urges Oroonoko to lead a rebellion against their captors, you see a profound reflection on leadership and moral integrity. Oroonoko, despite his longing for freedom, hesitates to engage in violence that would mimic the brutality of their oppressors. This demonstrates an essential lesson in leadership: maintaining one's moral compass, even in the face of adversity. His resistance to embrace cruelty—even when driven by a noble cause—underscores the strength found in true integrity and honorable action. In your own life, encountering situations where ethical choices seem fraught with complexity, Oroonoko's example encourages finding steadfastness and resisting the easier path of reactionary violence or dishonesty. By anchoring yourself in these values, you foster not only respect and dignity but also a legacy of principled leadership that inspires those who follow.

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## **Chapter 2 Summary: Anonymous, The Sexes Mis-match'd; or a New Way**

### **Summary of "The Sexes Mis-match'd"**

#### **Background Information:**

"The Strolers Pacquet Open'd" is a collection of farces published in 1742 by Andrew Jackson. These farces were adaptations of well-known Renaissance and Restoration plays, designed for performance at fairs and country towns. "The Sexes Mis-match'd" is one such adaptation, drawing from Thomas Southerne's "Oroonoko" and John Fletcher's "Monsieur Thomas." The farce reflects the early 18th-century perspective on gender roles, societal expectations, and racial attitudes, capturing an era before the significant anti-slavery movements of later decades.

#### **Plot Summary:**

The farce unfolds in Gibraltar, where characters engage in comedic—and often chaotic—romantic entanglements involving mistaken identities, gender disguises, and marriage schemes. The central character, Sir John Frolick, longs for the return of his son Thomas, who has been away on



travels. Sir John's servant, Lancelot, humorously reports Thomas's return using convoluted French-influenced language, much to Sir John's chagrin.

Thomas, upon arrival, reveals his reformation, shocking his father, who laments the loss of his once unruly son. In a subplot, Thomas's sister, known as Winlove, disguises herself in men's clothing, seizing control of her marital future by actively searching for a husband, utilizing the liberty her disguise affords.

Gibraltar's social scene is portrayed through characters like Widow Longfort, who is on the lookout for a youthful match to re-enter matrimony. The widow and Winlove engage in humorous banter, reflecting the period's dynamics of courtship and marriage. A comedic misunderstanding ensues when Winlove mistakenly incurs the widow's affections while wearing the male guise.

Simultaneously, Thomas, disguised in his sister's clothes, attempts to visit his love, Maria, resulting in a comedic bed-switch trick involving Maria's black servant, Kate. This blend of racial themes and cross-dressing intrigues exemplifies the farce's exploration of identity and societal role reversals.

The play converges in a bubbled scheme where marriages are proposed and disrupted, with mistaken relationships resolved in the end. Notably, Winlove's true identity is uncovered, leading to a reshuffling of romantic



pairings—ensuring alignment for all characters.

The farce concludes with Sir John reconciling with his son, the young lovers paired rightly, and the widow accepting Jack Belmour as her husband. The play ends on a festive note, inviting all couples to celebratory nuptials, epitomizing the typical comedic resolution of marriages bringing closure and joy.

### Character Notes:

1. **Sir John Frolick:** Patriarch confused by his son's unexpected change and comic mishaps with Lancelot.
2. **Thomas/Monsieur Thomas:** Central figure transformed through travel, creating uproar with his antics in female disguise.
3. **Winlove/Charlot:** Thomas's sister adeptly maneuvering through marriage prospects by cross-dressing.
4. **Widow Longfort:** Rich widow humorously navigating her desires to remarry, representing gender norms and expectations.
5. **Belmour and Jack Belmour:** Tomas's friends who weave through the comedic web of marital intentions.

In all, "The Sexes Mis-match'd" captures a satirical portrayal of courtship and identity in the Enlightenment era, utilizing societal and racial commentary reflective of its time.



# Critical Thinking

**Key Point:** Identity and societal role reversal

**Critical Interpretation:** In the farce 'The Sexes Mis-match'd,' the masterful use of mistaken identities and reversed societal roles inspires us to question and re-evaluate the roles we play in everyday life. As Winlove takes control of her destiny, disguised as a man, she demonstrates the power of stepping outside societal norms to shape one's future. In your life, this could encourage you to embrace new perspectives and challenge the status quo when it comes to personal goals, relationships, and social expectations. It urges you to think beyond traditional boundaries and foster a brave approach to self-expression and resourcefulness, even in situations governed by rigid conventions. By daring to see the world from a different vantage point, you open the door to a myriad of possibilities and greater personal growth.

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## Chapter 3 Summary: A Tragedy, As it is now Acted at the Theatre-Royal

### Summary of Chapters 104-115: Historical Context and Adaptation of "Oroonoko"

John Hawkesworth (1720-1773), an influential figure in 18th-century English literature, played a significant role in the adaptation of classic works and in promoting moral narratives through fiction. Born into a family financially ruined by the South Sea Bubble—a speculative investment that notably included the slave trade—Hawkesworth began his career in literature after leaving a law apprenticeship. His path led him to form connections with notable figures such as Samuel Johnson and David Garrick, fostering his literary ambitions.

Hawkesworth is recognized for his role as editor and contributor to esteemed periodicals like *\*The Gentleman's Magazine\** and *\*The Adventurer\**, promoting moral virtues through both fiction and essays. His adaptation of Thomas Southerne's play "Oroonoko" reflects his commitment to dramatizing themes of virtue and justice. Supported by his friend Garrick, the adaptation was staged at the Theatre-Royal in Drury Lane, London in 1759, with significant success.





## **Adaptation Highlights:**

### **1. Background and Motivation:**

- "Oroonoko," originally by Aphra Behn and later adapted by Southerne, portrays the tragic life of an African prince enslaved and brought to the West Indies.
- Hawkesworth sought to remove what he saw as the "immoral" comic elements in Southerne's version, focusing on the solemnity of the tragedy and enhancing its moral message.

### **2. Character and Plot Adjustments:**

- Hawkesworth made minimal changes to the original tragic elements, preferring instead to alter perceptions of heroism and moral integrity. The character of Oroonoko is idealized, embodying the noble savage trope.
- New scenes and characters, such as an expanded role for Aboan, Oroonoko's companion, emphasized loyalty and the consequences of betrayal.

### **3. Thematic Enhancements:**

- The play elucidates themes of freedom, integrity, and the clash between



civilized values and barbarity, framing Oroonoko's struggle against colonial injustices.

- The adaptation intentionally centers on moral dilemmas and the pursuit of virtue despite systemic oppression.

#### **4. Public and Critical Reception:**

- The play was initially well-received, lauded for its moral undertones. Hawkesworth's literary style appealed to contemporary audiences, leading to consistent performances until 1770.

- Critics later disparaged Hawkesworth for perceived literary shortcomings, though early performances were met with acclaim.

#### **5. Legacy and Influence:**

- Despite later criticisms, Hawkesworth's adaptation was important for its alignment with Enlightenment values and its impact on the portrayal of noble characters in literature.

- The play influenced subsequent adaptations and remains a point of discussion in terms of its approach to race, colonialism, and morality.

The tragic narrative concludes with the deaths of Oroonoko and Imoinda, marking a poignant commentary on freedom, loyalty, and the human spirit's resistance to tyranny. Throughout, Hawkesworth's commitment to depicting



moral virtue and integrity shines, contributing significantly to English theatrical history.

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## Critical Thinking

**Key Point:** Pursuit of Virtue Amidst Adversity

**Critical Interpretation:** Amidst the complex social landscape and morally ambiguous undertones seen in "Oroonoko," the unwavering commitment to integrity and virtue serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration. Even within oppressive systems, the character of Oroonoko resolutely embodies noble ideals, showcasing that pursuing justice and moral rectitude remains possible, even when the odds are stacked against you. His struggle and tragic narrative remind you that the pursuit of truth and virtue should persist despite adversity. This conviction fosters hope and drives change, validating the power each individual possesses to become a catalyst for virtuous action and challenging unjust societal norms.

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# Chapter 4: Francis Gentleman, Oroonoko: or the Royal

## Summary of Chapters

Francis Gentleman's adaptation of Thomas Southerne's play "Oroonoko: or the Royal Slave" is a theatrical rendition that amplifies the original story's themes against slavery. Gentleman, born in Dublin in 1728, was an actor and writer known for his critical drama reviews and various literary endeavors. His adaptation, along with others by John Hawkesworth and anonymous writers during the same period, reflects a growing sentiment against the slave trade. Gentleman's version, written from an actor's perspective, modifies Southerne's narrative by emphasizing slavery's atrocities and includes significant plot and character changes to critique the institution of slavery.

In Gentleman's adaptation, the character of Massingano, a former enemy of Oroonoko, is introduced as a central antagonist. Massingano, who once lost a battle to Oroonoko and was subsequently sold into slavery, seizes the opportunity for revenge when he learns of Oroonoko's enslavement. With his follower Zinzo, Massingano plots to ruin Oroonoko by exploiting the prince's vulnerable situation. This addition creates a more intricate and personal conflict within the play, enhancing the dramatic tension.



Imoinda, Oroonoko's lover, has an expanded role with more emotional and sentimental speeches that explore her perseverance amidst adversity. Gentleman's adaptation also critiques the hypocritical nature of the Christian slaveholders through Massingano's satirical remarks on Christianity, highlighting the moral contradictions within the characters. The play

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## Chapter 5 Summary: Anonymous, Oroonoko, A Tragedy. Altered from

In 1760, an anonymous author adapted Thomas Southerne's play "Oroonoko" into a new version titled "Oroonoko, A Tragedy." While little is known about this adapter, it is presumed he was a man with some familiarity with London's theatrical world, though not enough to secure a staging for his play. His preface reveals frustrations with theatrical managers Garrick and Rich, who dismissed his work, possibly due to its lack of merit or simply managerial preferences.

The adaptation retains the original tragic plot by Southerne but omits comic scenes and introduces two new characters: Maria, the Lieutenant Governor's sister and engaged to Blandford; and Heartwell, a council member akin to Southerne's Stanmore. Maria is a confidante to Imoinda, while Heartwell disapproves of the Lieutenant Governor's intentions toward Imoinda. The alterations aim to enhance characters' virtues and express moral critiques on themes like colonial governance and the slave trade without diverging significantly from Southerne's storyline.

The play opens with a dialogue between Imoinda (also known as Clemene) and Maria, exploring Imoinda's denunciation of the slave trade. Subsequent scenes focus on Heartwell and Maria's concerns over the Lieutenant Governor's intentions, leading Heartwell to urge the Governor to reform



morally. Blandford and Heartwell discuss proper leadership for colonial management and advocate for Oroonoko's release, reflecting themes of moral governance.

Despite its lack of explicit abolitionist agendas, the adaptation hints at these sentiments through dialogues that underscore humanity's potential nobility and criticize the slave trade. The final act involves Oroonoko's rebellion, betrayal, and tragic end, mirroring Southerne's original climax but with added emphasis on moral failings attributed to colonial rulers.

This adaptation contributes to Oroonoko's legacy by aligning slightly more with abolitionist thinking and highlighting British colonial responsibilities, yet preserving the tragic essence that Southerne originally envisioned. The moral and political undercurrents articulated in this version cater to Enlightenment ideals, specifically those advocating for equality and the rational progression of the human condition.

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## Critical Thinking

**Key Point:** Advocacy for moral and just leadership

**Critical Interpretation:** Chapter 5 unveils the significant theme of advocating for moral leadership through the characters Heartwell and Blandford. Their discussions transcend the narrative, emphasizing the importance of integrity and ethical governance. In an age marked by social change, this lesson resonates deeply, beckoning you to reflect on leadership roles within your community, workplace, or personal life. Heartwell's determination stands as a beacon, inspiring you to champion justice and advocate for moral practices amidst challenges. Through this story, you are reminded of the pivotal role each individual plays in steering collective human progress towards equity and enlightenment. Despite the whispers of tragedy that echo through its lines, the chapter invites you to evaluate the leaders you support, as well as to introspect on how you might embody these virtues in the spheres of your own influence.



## Chapter 6 Summary: John Ferriar, The Prince of Angola

In 1788, John Ferriar, a notable physician and abolitionist living in Manchester, published an abolitionist play titled "The Prince of Angola," which adapted the story of Oroonoko from previous renditions by authors like John Hawkesworth. Ferriar's adaptation emerged as part and parcel of the activist climate in Manchester, a city that had become a nucleus for efforts against the British slave trade despite its economic ties to the pro-slavery city of Liverpool. Ferriar, while involved with Manchester's Society for the Purpose of Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, utilized this theatrical work to propagate anti-slavery sentiments, employing the stage to awaken the public to the inhumane conditions of slave life.

"The Prince of Angola" follows Oroonoko, an African prince sold into slavery and brought to a plantation, which prompts him to grapple with issues of freedom and identity. He initially struggles with the treachery of Europeans, signified by his betrayal by a ship captain whom he trusted. Throughout the play, Oroonoko is depicted as a noble, tragic hero who consistently upholds his integrity, despite the adversity and betrayal surrounding him. Ferriar excised and rewrote substantial portions of the original adaptations to remove elements he deemed unsuited for a genuine abolitionist narrative, such as apologist sentiments toward slaveholders.

The play's action intensifies as Oroonoko encounters various characters who

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shape his destiny, including fellow captives and sympathizers who provide moral support amidst the oppressive conditions. The plot evolves with Oroonoko attempting to lead a rebellion against their captors, reflecting Ferriar's emphasis on rightful self-assertion against tyranny. Throughout, Ferriar's revisions aim to strip away comedic subplots prevalent in earlier versions, offering instead a more poignant examination of the realities of enslavement.

Ferriar's adaptation stands out not only for its dramatic presentation but for its controversial pro-slavery opposition within the colonial milieu of the time. The play exposes the brutality of the slave trade, challenging the audience to confront the moral bankruptcy of viewing people as property. Through lines that infuse passionate rhetoric on compassion and human rights, Ferriar intertwines abolitionist ideals with the personal narrative of Oroonoko, providing cultural and political commentary vital for the movement against slavery.

Performances occurred at the Theatre Royal in Manchester—a city deeply engaged in public abolitionist activities. However, documentary evidence of the play's wider impact remains sparse, possibly due to the subsequent destruction of theatre records in a fire. Despite limited existing copies, Ferriar's work remains a testament to the powerful use of theatre as a means of social and political intervention, striving to catalyze public consciousness and legislative change in favor of abolishing the slave trade. Through both



his play and his broader abolitionist efforts, Ferriar helped illuminate the monstrous inhumanity of slavery, giving voice to the voiceless and portraying the timeless struggle for dignity and freedom.

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## Critical Thinking

**Key Point:** The Power of Integrity

**Critical Interpretation:** In "The Prince of Angola," Oroonoko's unwavering integrity amidst betrayal and adversity is a testament to the enduring strength of staying true to one's moral values. As you journey through life, you may encounter dire circumstances and people who undermine your trust. Yet, maintaining your core ethical principles not only shapes your character but can also inspire others around you. Oroonoko's steadfastness, even when facing the deepest injustices, underscores the power of integrity as a guiding light. When confronting personal challenges or witnessing broader societal wrongs, let Oroonoko's noble mind and heart inspire you to champion justice and honor, illuminating paths of change and resilience in your life.

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## Chapter 7 Summary: Hannah More, Slavery, a Poem

### Summary of Hannah More's "Slavery, a Poem"

Hannah More, a prominent British writer and philanthropist, was deeply committed to social reform and was a driving force behind various humanitarian causes during her lifetime, including the abolition of the slave trade. Born in 1745 in Bristol, she was well-connected with influential figures like Samuel Johnson and was an active member of the Blue Stocking Circle, a group of intellectual women. Although she explored various literary forms, More's later focus was on religious and moral writings after a shift away from the theater, influenced by her strong Anglican beliefs.

In the late 1780s, at the request of abolitionist William Wilberforce, More wrote "Slavery, a Poem." This work was a poignant critique of the slave trade and a plea for universal human liberty. The poem was composed alongside the growing abolitionist movement in Britain, which sought to end the inhumane trade in human lives—a goal only legally realized in the British Empire in 1807, with slavery itself not completely abolished until 1833.

On the surface, "Slavery, a Poem" calls upon the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality, questioning why freedom, represented as an intellectual



light, has been unevenly distributed among humanity. More challenges the notion that Africans are lesser beings, emphasizing the shared humanity and capacity for thought, emotion, and moral understanding between Europeans and Africans.

The poem vividly portrays the brutal realities of slavery, with images of villages set ablaze and families torn apart, criticizing the moral blindness and greed that underpin the slave trade. It condemns the hypocrisy of self-proclaimed Christians who perpetrated or benefited from these atrocities, casting doubt on their faith and morality.

More draws a stark contrast between the exploitative actions of European colonizers and the virtuous conduct of figures like Captain Cook and William Penn. She argues that true honor and lasting fame come from just and peaceful endeavors, not from conquest or oppression. The piece suggests that if such explorers had embodied values of compassion and enlightenment, the relationship between races and cultures might have been collaborative and beneficial.

The poem ends with a hopeful vision of redemption and change, where Britain, known for its liberty, extends this freedom to all nations. It paints a picture of Mercy descending from heaven to heal the world, erasing the stains of slavery, and lifting the oppressed to a new era of peace and justice.

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Overall, More's "Slavery, a Poem" is not just a protest against the practice of slavery but a broader invocation for humanity to embrace compassion, equality, and the shared dignity of all people.

Key Aspect	Description
Author Background	Hannah More was a British writer, philanthropist, and member of the Blue Stocking Circle, known for her religious and moral writings.
Abolition Efforts	More was a staunch supporter of the abolition of the slave trade, collaborating with abolitionist William Wilberforce.
Publication Context	"Slavery, a Poem" was composed in the late 1780s during the burgeoning abolitionist movement in Britain.
Key Themes	Highlights Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality; critiques the uneven distribution of freedom; condemns the dehumanization of Africans.
Critique of Society	Paints vivid images of slavery's brutality; criticizes the moral hypocrisy of benefiting from slavery while professing Christianity.
Comparison	Juxtaposes colonial oppressors with honorable figures like Captain Cook and William Penn.
Vision for the Future	Ends with a hopeful vision of a redeemed Britain that extends freedom globally.
Overall Message	A call for compassion, equality, and recognition of shared human dignity.



## Critical Thinking

**Key Point:** Embracing Universal Human Liberty

**Critical Interpretation:** In More's poignant poem, a core theme that emerges is the advocacy for universal human liberty. You are encouraged to embrace and promote the inherent dignity and rights of every individual, recognizing the shared humanity that bonds us all, regardless of race, nationality, or status. This vision pushes you to challenge any form of oppression, and instead, work towards creating a just and equitable society where every person is afforded the freedom and respect they deserve. By adopting this perspective, you contribute not only to your personal growth but also to the broader advancement towards global peace and justice.

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## Chapter 8: Thomas Bellamy, The Benevolent Planters

### ### Summary of Thomas Bellamy's "The Benevolent Planters"

#### #### Background and Author

Thomas Bellamy, a minor literary figure in the late 18th century, was a British author and editor who transitioned from a tradesman to a literary and theatrical career. His work was influenced by contemporaries like John Hawkesworth and Francis Gentleman. Bellamy ventured into the world of periodicals with "The General Magazine and Impartial Review," intending to include a variety of content such as Shakespearean excerpts, aiming to provide readers with a complete Shakespeare collection over time.

#### #### "The Benevolent Planters"

##### **Context and Influence:**

Published in 1789, "The Benevolent Planters," also referred to as "The Friends," was a short drama inspired by earlier works such as George Colman The Younger's "Inkle and Yarico" and the abolitionist sentiments prevalent at the time. The play was influenced by Bellamy's engagement with the philanthropic ideas of the Quakers and the popular theatrical themes of romanticized African characters, as seen in Richard Steele's depiction in *The Spectator*. The dramatic piece draws on the narrative of African slavery



but aims to present a more sanitized and moral story in line with the Christian humanitarian outlook.

### **Plot Summary:**

Set in Jamaica, a British colony reliant on slave labor, the drama follows Oran and Selima, two enslaved Africans separated by war and united by love. On a festival day, they reunite and are eventually freed by benevolent English planters who act out of a sense of Christian morality rather than abolitionist conviction. Unlike the earlier story of Oroonoko, Bellamy's characters are compliant with their circumstances, accepting Christianity and European rule without question.

### **Themes and Characters:**

The drama is marked by themes of redemption, Christian faith, and racial harmony under the guise of benevolence. Oran and Selima are idealized as virtuous and submissive, resisting none of the indignities of slavery but yearning for each other within a framework of European control. The play diminishes any revolutionary aspects by omitting their royal status and potential uprisings. Bellamy's portrayal reflects contemporary societal fears of slave uprisings, advocating for better treatment rather than outright abolition.



## **Reception and Impact:**

"The Benevolent Planters" was performed at the Haymarket Theatre with notable actors like Stephen and Elizabeth Kemble in blackface, which was a common practice at the time. Though it did not achieve lasting success, the play reflected the complex intersection of humanitarian sentiment and the theatrical presentation of slavery in Britain. By aligning with Christian values, it aimed to soothe British anxieties about slave rebellions while seemingly advocating for a kinder version of slavery. The music and dance sequences provided entertainment, minimizing the play's potential controversial stance on slavery.

## **Musical and Literary Devices:**

William Reeve's music, including an adaptation of "Rule Britannia," added emotional appeal, reinforcing the patriotic undertones while maintaining the theatrical tradition of song and dance as essential elements. Bellamy's writing style used conventional poetic phrases to express themes of love and redemption, with cultural references to European literature through music and references to the narrative of Oroonoko.

Overall, Thomas Bellamy's "The Benevolent Planters" stands as a complex artifact of its time, showcasing the period's interplay between advocacy, sentimentality, and theatrical traditions in addressing the subject of slavery.

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While attempting to inject a narrative of benevolence, it inadvertently highlights the limitations of such perspectives in effecting true social change.

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## Chapter 9 Summary: 'Biyi Bandele, Aphra Behn's Oroonoko in a new

'Biyi Bandele's adaptation of Aphra Behn's "Oroonoko," staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1999, reimagines Behn's 1688 novella by placing fresh emphasis on the African setting. Unlike previous adaptations, Bandele opens his play in a vividly imagined Coramantien, set in western Nigeria rather than Behn's ambiguously exotic locale. Here, Bandele introduces Oroonoko, a young warrior, and his love, Imoinda, amidst a cosmopolitan yet turbulent kingdom embroiled in the European slave trade with complicity from African statesmen. The corrupt Chief Orombo sells captives to Dutch and English traders, cynically illustrating the interconnectedness of African and Western interests.

Characters in Bandele's play are marked by distinct speech patterns. Orombo's sardonic and modernistic expressions contrast sharply with Oroonoko and Imoinda's poetic exchanges, reflecting a blend of traditional African and contemporary styles. Despite the historical setting, Bandele uses anachronisms and colloquialisms akin to Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect, ensuring the audience is aware of both the past and the present influences in the narrative.

In Part Two, set in Surinam, Bandele deviates by infusing the play with elements from John Hawkesworth's 1759 adaptation of Thomas Southerne's



play. The dramatic change in style reflects the shift from Coramantien's vibrant court to Surinam's oppressive colonial plantation. Imoinda reappears under her slave name, Clemene, illustrating the dehumanizing context of her enslavement where she and Oroonoko are separated yet again. Oroonoko's captors, including the cowardly Deputy Governor Byam and the manipulative Captain Stanmore, showcase the moral complexities and betrayals typical of colonial power dynamics.

By integrating Yoruba myths, like the trickster god Eshu, and African proverbs, Bandele enriches the characters' backgrounds and highlights the cultural clash with European ideologies. Despite the historical dislocation, his portrayal of Oroonoko's love for Imoinda and the tragic culmination of their story resonates with universal themes of love, betrayal, and identity.

Bandele's adaptation is as much a critique of historical colonialism as it is a meditative tribute to African narratives, blending myth with history in a modern theater context. It challenges audiences to engage with a past that is continually reshaped by present contexts and future implications, exploring the lasting echoes of a legacy of cultural encounters and exploitation.



## Critical Thinking

**Key Point:** The enduring power of love amidst oppression

**Critical Interpretation:** Imagine a love so profound that it defies the confines of circumstance, transcending the harshest of realities. In this chapter, Bantle's adaptation stands as a testament to the enduring power of Oroonoko and Imoinda's love, showcasing how it perseveres through the brutal trials of enslavement and betrayal. As they face division and dehumanization, their bond becomes a beacon of defiance against the overwhelming forces striving to subdue their spirits. This narrative inspires you to recognize the transformative capacity of love and its undying resilience even in your moments of adversity. By cherishing and nurturing genuine connections, you can navigate the most disheartening experiences with hope and integrity, forging a path of resistance and hope in an often unforgiving world.

