

The Royal Slave: Nobility, Diplomacy and the “African Prince” in Britain, 1748–1752

RYAN HANLEY*

E-mail: ryan.hanley@new.ox.ac.uk

William Anseh Sessarakoo, the son of a powerful Fante slave trader on the Gold Coast, was tricked and sold into slavery in Barbados by a British ship’s captain during the 1740s. He was emancipated and brought to Britain in 1748, where he enjoyed a brief period of national celebrity before returning to the Gold Coast in 1750. This paper examines the specific political and cultural circumstances surrounding his remarkable journey, through the lens of the media generated about him during his time in Britain. It demonstrates that the most extensive contemporaneous account of Sessarakoo’s story, *The Royal African*, was in reality an attempt to generate popular support for a moribund Royal African Company and incorporate slave trading into narratives of national identity, based on notions of economic responsibility and honour. Adhering to conventions typified in Thomas Southerne’s stage adaptation of *Oroonoko*, further popular representations of Sessarakoo emphasised his aristocratic status and putatively inherited ‘noble’ characteristics. In doing so, they emphasised perceived differences between him and the majority of African peoples, who were deemed suitable for enslavement. The paper closes with an examination of some of the effects of Sessarakoo’s visit on Euro-African trade and diplomacy on the Gold Coast.

Key words: Africa, Anseh, cultural encounter, identity, Sessarakoo, slavery.

For a short time in the middle of the eighteenth century, William Anseh Sessarakoo was a well-known name in Britain. His father was Eno Baisie Kurentsi, known to English merchants as John Currantee—one of the most powerful traders on the West African coast. Kurentsi effectively ran the major coastal trading town of Anomabu, which was, according to Randy Sparks, “the most important port on the Gold Coast.”¹ The significance of this region to the Atlantic economy during the period, and to the slave trade in particular, should not be underestimated. Around 12 per cent of all the African slaves transported across the Atlantic between 1470 and 1880 were bought and sold on the Gold Coast.² Kurentsi was not just a trader at Anomabu, but a *caboceer*—a powerful political leader most often compared to a king or prince by British commentators.³ By the 1740s, Kurentsi’s trade with the Europeans at

Anomabu, as much as his military resources and *de facto* local political authority, had helped to secure his position as one of the most influential Fante *caboceers* out of the dozens in the region.⁴ He consolidated his authority through strategic alliances and carefully chosen marriages, ensuring that he could call upon neighbouring states for diplomatic and military support in times of crisis. For example, one of his wives (and Sessarakoo's mother) Eukobah, was the daughter of the king of Akwamu and the niece of the king of Akron.⁵ His pre-eminence among the Anomabu slave traders also made him one of the most powerful men in the region from a European trade perspective. Slavers wishing to do business not just in Anomabu, but along the entire Gold Coast, were well aware of the need to court Kurenti's good favour. However, in 1744 a British trader, under the premise of bringing his favourite son Sessarakoo to Britain to gain a European education, sold him into slavery instead.

Sessarakoo's story of enslavement and survival, predating any Anglophone black autobiography, was not widely known until after he was emancipated and came to Britain late in 1748.⁶ In the intervening years, Kurenti had cooled relations with British slavers, further damaging an already-moribund Royal African Company's fortunes and giving their French competitors a distinct advantage. One way British people responded to this diplomatic crisis and its potential implications for the plantation economy was through their treatment and representations of Sessarakoo during his time in Britain. The young man was placed under the protection of the Earl of Halifax (director of the Board of Trade and Plantations), dressed in the finest English clothes, taken to the theatre, and introduced to George II.⁷ He was the subject of a biography and two published poems.⁸ British commentators' deployment of cultural markers of nobility—clothing, education and conspicuous association with social elites—helped to invoke the sentimentalised image of the royal slave, popularised by Thomas Southerne's stage adaptation of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*. The quite unusual and specific textures of Sessarakoo's celebrity in Britain had significant implications both for trade on the West African coast and the way the Royal African Company (RAC) and the Transatlantic slave trade was understood in the British popular imagination during the mid-century period.

The story of Sessarakoo's highly-publicised visit to Britain is widely-known among historians of slavery and the black Atlantic, but has rarely been discussed in depth.⁹ Some of the most sustained analyses of this episode in Anglo-African relations from a British perspective are still to be found in Wylie Sypher's work dating from the 1940s.¹⁰ In more current literature, Sessarakoo's name is most often featured in discussions of portraiture of black people in eighteenth-century Britain, since he was the subject of a striking oil likeness by Gabriel Matthias in 1749, which in turn formed the basis of two engravings by John Faber in 1750.¹¹ The role of his status as a prince in his redemption from slavery is sometimes acknowledged, but usually only as a means for framing discussions about better-known eighteenth-century black figures like Olaudah Equiano.¹² For historians of West Africa, meanwhile, Sessarakoo is eclipsed by his powerful father, and his enslavement, emancipation and visit to Britain are often read as incidental rather than central to international diplomacy in the region.¹³

Armed conflict between the British and French and the collapse of the RAC at the exact time that he returned to Anomabu has also generated an enormous amount of interference for historians of the Gold Coast region to contend with. The only account that has so far isolated the importance of Sessarakoo's British tour on diplomacy along the West African Coast can be found in Sparks' recent history of Anomabu.¹⁴ What follows, therefore, is not an attempt to read Sessarakoo's story in isolation from its broader Atlantic context, but rather an analytic account of the media generated in Britain about the "African Prince" and a discussion of its implications for Anglo-African relations, and more specifically, for popular British attitudes towards slavery and African people during the period. Such an account prompts us to reconsider eighteenth-century Afro-European diplomacy as neither sited exclusively within Africa, nor as uncomplicatedly reflecting the exploitation of African peoples. Rather, it suggests that we must situate African agency back within the specific material and political contexts of the period—that is, at the epicentre of a rapidly developing, transnational, and intercultural Atlantic world.

Kurentsi sent the teenage Sessarakoo to Britain as a business decision. British and French trading companies had been vying against each other for a monopoly over the Anomabu slave and gold trades since the RAC had abandoned their fort there in 1730.¹⁵ Kurentsi had been playing them off against each other for his own benefit at least since he first appeared in British records in 1734.¹⁶ As David Richardson suggests, "[a]lthough Africans are often depicted as the weaker of the partners" in eighteenth-century Afro-European trade, "the fact that commercial exchange became the *modus operandi* of interaction reflects... more the strength of African communities in their dealings with Europeans rather than their weakness."¹⁷ The strength of the Fante community in Anomabu, and more particularly the skill of their traders, led to their being cast by Europeans as "notorious swindlers" who regularly got the best of their trading partners.¹⁸ For Kurentsi's part, he used the fact that he had spent some time in the British fort when he was a child to lend credence to his claims that he identified as an Englishman. British traders, including those of the RAC, took this to mean that he would favour them to the extent of facilitating a *de facto* monopoly over the slave trade in Anomabu. Meanwhile, he entertained French traders and accepted lavish gifts of brandy and fine textiles on the understanding that *they* would take over as the favoured European customers of the Fante traders.¹⁹

Kurentsi was happy to allow British and French interests to continue upping the ante with regards to the gifts they offered in exchange for favourable trade terms, but he recognised the need to learn more about their cultures if he was going to maximise his profits. In the early 1740s, he accepted an offer from a French trader to send his son Bassi to Paris. This was ostensibly so that Bassi could get a European education and find out more about French culture, but there were vested interests on both sides. For the French, the visit was an opportunity to display the wealth and power of their nation, and convince Kurentsi that they presented the better long-term prospect as exclusive trading partners. For Kurentsi and the other *caboceers*, the visit represented a chance to gain more expensive gifts and learn how to better negotiate with French traders.

In the event, both sides got what they wanted. Bassi was treated as royalty during his visit to Paris, introduced to King Louis XV, tutored, baptised, and sent home loaded with gold and jewellery and dressed in the finest French clothes. Kurentzi responded by warming to the French traders and agreeing, in principle, to their building a fort of their own at Anomabu. The British were only able to prevent the plan from going ahead by firing their cannons on the town (putatively justified by the fact that the French were their antagonists during the War of the Austrian Succession).²⁰ Clearly, giving a son of Kurentzi's the "royal treatment" in Europe was an effective diplomatic tactic. More to the point, the *caboceer* was perceptive enough to realise the potential profits arising from British desperation to secure their trading primacy in the region. So, when a ship's captain offered to take a second son to Britain to demonstrate their wealth, Kurentzi was quick to take him up on the offer.

The identity of the ship's captain is contentious. The main contemporaneous written account, the anonymously-published *Royal African*, adheres to conventions of written decorum in refusing to name him, since "no man breathing who betrays and sells a Prince, unless judicially convicted of it, will acknowledge the Crime."²¹ Sparks suggests that the captain was David Bruce Crichton of the London slaver the *Lady Carolina*. This identification is made on the basis of a certificate stating that Kurentzi had in October 1747 requested Jonathan Roberts, an officer of the RAC, to "redeem his son who had been sold at Barbadoes for a Slave in case of the death of Mr Crichton." Sparks therefore suggests that Sessarakoo was tricked into slavery during 1747.²²

However, the *Lady Carolina*'s only recorded slave trading voyage of the 1740s did not leave London for Africa until November 1748, just a few weeks before Sessarakoo arrived in Britain after being freed in Barbados.²³ A copy of Roberts' certificate was sent to a "David Crichton Esq." in London on 6 December 1749, along with a letter, which mentioned "the price you gave for him."²⁴ This suggests that Crichton was a slave trader or absentee planter who had bought Sessarakoo, not sold him. The David Crichton to whom Kurentzi had referred in the certificate was therefore most likely not the captain of the *Lady Carolina* as Sparks suggests, but the former Chief Agent for the RAC of the same name. This David Crichton had been a co-signatory of a 1739 petition of "African Traders to the King," requesting more naval support for British slave traders based on the Gold Coast.²⁵ Crichton's ties to the RAC would explain the relative ease with which the Company secured Sessarakoo's release in 1748. Moreover, the lengthy caption on Faber's 1750 engraving of the prince, as well as the advertisement for the 1755 edition of William Dodd's poems about Sessarakoo, state that "he was sold at Barbadoes as a slave in the year 1744."²⁶ If these suggestions are accurate (it should be stressed that no documentary evidence has yet been found either to corroborate or disprove them), then the only possible ship Sessarakoo could have taken from the Gold Coast to Barbados would have been the *Lively* of Liverpool, and the man who tricked him into slavery its captain, Patrick Dwyer.²⁷ This is far from a satisfactorily positive identification, but it does present a more viable explanation than David Bruce Crichton.

This identification is significant because it had an impact on the way the RAC was represented when Sessarakoo's story was later popularised in Britain. The Company, originally founded and granted a monopoly over all British commerce with Africa in 1672, had been shrinking in profit and influence since deregulation of the slave trade in 1712. Private "separate traders," meanwhile, increased their profits and ate up much of the RAC's market share.²⁸ A series of public scandals surrounding stock manipulation and embezzlement of public subsidies by RAC officials had made them the subject of public derision in the 1720s and 1730s, further undermining investor confidence.²⁹ As William Pettigrew has suggested, skirmishes off the West African coast during the War of the Austrian Succession lent some much-needed credibility to the Company's claims that a strong relationship between traders and the Royal Navy was necessary to resist the encroachments of French interests.³⁰ But this proved a temporary crutch for an essentially defeated RAC. Crichton himself was deeply interested in the way that the Company was perceived by the public at the close of the war, since he personally bore some of the financial impact of its eventual failure. When the company was being wound up in 1749, an amendment had to be made to the legislation in the House of Lords to secure his freedom from debtor's prison; he was by that time answerable for £1400 of credit which the Company could no longer afford to repay.³¹

The fullest contemporaneous account of Sessarakoo's kidnap, *The Royal African*, was published at the beginning of the RAC's final descent in 1749. Despite the claim made in its full title, it was as much a piece of pro-RAC polemic as a biographical account of the "*Young Prince of Annamaboe*." It made much of the potentially damaging effects of deregulated markets on the West African coast, and the low moral character of irresponsible separate traders,

who in modern times have much improved and extended their commerce in those parts, not only by the advantage they have of trading without the incumbrances of forts, garrisons, and regular establishments, of all which however they enjoy the protection, but by their keeping a kind of settled magazines or floating factories almost constantly on the coasts [which] sinks the value of *British* commodities and manufactures in *Guinea*, and raises the price of slaves in our colonies in the *West Indies*.³²

The implication here was that the separate traders were responsible for the ill fortunes of the (partially publically-funded) RAC through their enjoyment of the protections offered by their forts without making contributions towards their upkeep. Worse, they also prioritised their own personal gain over the extension of British national interests by taking full advantage of increasingly *laissez-faire* British economic policy. This supposedly destabilised markets on either side of the Atlantic by undercutting the more socially responsible RAC. The text was quick to point out that the man who tricked Sessarakoo into slavery was "one of the principal directors of this kind of commerce," underlining the association between unchecked free-marketism and dishonest, unsustainable, and therefore distinctly un-British business practices.³³

Pettigrew has demonstrated how the RAC sought to associate its pro-monopoly stance with "sentimentalised commerce" in the mid-eighteenth century by emphasising

“the need to treat Africans with humanity, hospitality, and dignity, a dignity that remained attached to royalty and would be best upheld by the royally sponsored African Company.”³⁴ Clearly, the similitude between the titles of Sessarakoo’s nominal biography (*The Royal African*) and the RAC itself manifested connections implied in the text between regal associations and ethical trade—specifically, ethical slave trading. The inability to recognise social rank as a legitimate security from slavery was taken as evidence of the separate trader’s moral deficiencies; by refusing to act in a manner that prevented a prince from being enslaved, “he plainly shewed, that, in his opinion, all Blacks were destined to be slaves.”³⁵ This may sound like a peculiar accusation coming from an organisation dealing, at least in part, in African slaves. But in the 1740s, proto-racist notions of ethnic difference, which were to characterise much proslavery rhetoric during the abolition debates later in the century, had not yet coalesced into any internally coherent form. There was nothing dishonourable in slave trading, but ignorance of or disregard for the dignity of a “prince” was vulgar. Moreover, the separate trader’s mercenary lack of regard for traditional social hierarchy had endangered British national interests at Anomabu. The RAC was left to uphold British honour by rescuing him at their own expense, “obliged to take upon them the satisfaction of an injury in which they had not the least concern.” After all, if they had not acted, Kurentsi might have begun to seriously entertain the prospect of a French monopoly. The RAC was necessary to Britain, *The Royal African* therefore suggested, because they were willing to represent the nation to its best advantage, even when the financial return itself was, at best, indirect. Unlike the separate traders, the Company was “at all times answerable to the several *Negro* governments upon the Coast for the conduct and behaviour of the *British* nation.”³⁶ Like their nominal patron King George II, they were ambassadors of British values.

The notion of nobility, signifying both inherited social rank and innate personal characteristics, was central in *The Royal African*’s portrayal of Sessarakoo as a sympathetic figure. Legitimacy was a key issue. Bassi, his half-brother who had visited France, “was born of a slave, which is a circumstance among the Negroes that creates a kind of Illegitimacy.”³⁷ Despite the care taken to show that Kurentsi was “not... all at destitute, either of sound sense or paternal affection” towards Bassi, a clear hierarchy of qualities as well as rank was acknowledged between the two sons.³⁸ Sessarakoo was Kurentsi’s “greatest favourite” because “his mother was not only a free woman and his chief wife, but also the daughter of one of the principal persons in the country.”³⁹ The young prince’s pedigree was reflected in his superior personal traits; he had “always been distinguished by the quickness of his parts, and the affability of his behaviour, as well as by a graceful deportment, and a very agreeable person.”⁴⁰ Naturally, the RAC had protected the national interest by nurturing a predisposition towards English traders. Sessarakoo “had lived for a time, when a perfect child, in the fort with one of the *African* Company’s principal officers, where he [acquired] a sincere affection for the nation. The old Caboceiro [Kurentsi] encouraged this disposition in him all he could, told him frequently that himself was an *Englishman*, and that he ought to think himself so too [...] and that therefore he

could not do better than to improve that kindness and esteem they had for him, by endeavouring every day to merit more and more their favour and friendship."⁴¹

At first glance, the construction of Sessarakoo as "a perfect child" might seem to have anticipated the Rousseauian "noble savage," but in reality the *Royal African* appealed to just the opposite definition of nobility. Natural "manners" were seen as indivisible from the material trappings of aristocracy, and marital legitimacy as a crucial function of primogeniture. In this respect, *The Royal African* was old-fashioned; several scholars have identified the mid-eighteenth century as a turning point in the representation of the illegitimate son in British culture from "social pariah" to "bastard as hero."⁴² But this text was intended as a piece of pro-RAC polemic and a public outing of the immorality of hawkish separate traders, not a novel of sensibility. Sentimental depictions of "the African Prince" would appear later. Readers of *The Royal African* were reminded constantly that Sessarakoo's status as the legitimate son of and—as it was incorrectly assumed—heir to a powerful trading partner made him an object of significant diplomatic utility.

British trade did in fact suffer once news of Sessarakoo's being tricked into slavery made its way back to Anomabu. Not unreasonably, Kurentsi made it clear to the RAC agents that he could not entertain the prospect of a British monopoly in the region until his son was freed. The Company acted swiftly, dispatching an agent to Barbados to remove Sessarakoo from slavery and bring him to Britain. Probably upon Kurentsi's insistence, another young Fante man was sent with the agent to accompany Sessarakoo and ensure his safety. The "pains taken on his behalf" by the RAC convinced the young prince that "his misfortune befell him from the disposition of a single person, and was entirely disapproved by *Englishmen* of every denomination; those even of the lowest rank expressing a just disdain of such iniquitous practices."⁴³ The RAC had facilitated the rehabilitation of Britain's reputation, but they had not yet impressed upon their trading partners the full majesty of their nation. Therefore, after "a valuable consideration" was paid to Crichton's agent to secure his release, Sessarakoo joined his companion and together they set sail for Britain. They arrived safely during December 1748 or January 1749. In a display of sincerity and esteem, the two young Fante men were placed under the protection of the President of the Board of Trade and the Earl of Halifax, George Montagu Dunk.

Halifax was new to his role at the Board of Trade, and he was keen to make a name for himself. As Andrew Beaumont has demonstrated, under his "fresh, dynamic leadership," the Board went from "professionally isolated" and "politically non-existent" to an effective hub for colonial bureaucracy during 1749.⁴⁴ He recognised the potential significance (and usefulness) of Sessarakoo's visit and intended to make the most of the opportunity. The two young Fante men had hardly arrived before they began their itinerary of public engagements with the cream of British fashionable society. On 22 January 1749, at "a numerous court at St. James's," Sessarakoo, now "richly dressed" in English clothes and styled in the British press as the "negro prince," was introduced to George II "and graciously received."⁴⁵ In February, the two young men were invited to attend a performance of Southerne's *Oroonoko* at

Covent Garden, where they presented more of a spectacle for the audience than the actors on stage.⁴⁶ In early March, *The Royal African* was published, going into a second edition by April.⁴⁷ The “two Annamaboes” were among the “royalty” in attendance at a lavish party thrown by the Duke of Richmond on 15 May to celebrate the end of the War of the Austrian Succession.⁴⁸ On 14 June, “the young Black Prince of Annamaboe” was one of the “persons of distinction” noted as sitting in the gallery of the House of Lords alongside the Prince of Wales to witness a speech given by the King.⁴⁹ In July and August, William Dodd wrote two poems about Sessarakoo and published them in *The Gentleman’s Magazine*.⁵⁰ The young men were also educated in the Christian religion, and baptised on 30 November.⁵¹ During the same year, Sessarakoo also sat for a portrait by Gabriel Matthias.

In each of these encounters, great care was taken by British observers to underline a certain limited type of social comparability between members of the African and European aristocracy. But this should not be confused with an assumption of social or intellectual parity. Public outrage at the enslavement of Sessarakoo has been attributed to widespread acceptance of his legitimately aristocratic status, “the older social attitude that class hierarchies were of greater importance than racial differences.”⁵² However, some nebulous racial hierarchies were palpable, even in reportage designed to stress these particular Africans’ inherent “nobility.” Indeed, the primitivist tendency of identifying individuals solely by their ethnic background actively hinders historical reconstruction, especially when working from newspaper reports. Everywhere, Sessarakoo and his companion (who still remains to be identified) were recorded as “the Black princes,” “the Negro prince and his companion,” or “the young Prince of Annamaboe.”⁵³

Moreover, the cultural markers of refinement used to identify them as princely were all narrowly Anglocentric—it was Halifax, after all, who was responsible “for clothing and educating them in a very genteel manner.”⁵⁴ This imposition of British cultural signifiers onto a non-white body contrasts sharply with the experiences of other non-European visitors to London during the eighteenth century. The most comparable example was Ayuba Suleiman Diallo, who visited Britain in 1733. Born to a leading Muslim Fula family, he was enslaved and transported to Maryland, bought and manumitted by James Oglethorpe (then Director of the RAC), and brought to England.⁵⁵ But while this story was similar to Sessarakoo’s, Samuel Hoare’s 1733 portrait of Diallo depicted him in traditional costume, consisting of a long *thobe* and turban. Similarly, Mai, the young Polynesian man who visited in 1774 was most often depicted in Orientalist “native” dress.⁵⁶ The reason Sessarakoo was dressed in “the European manner” rather than in an approximation of his own “native” attire lay in the fact that his visit was intended to “contribute greatly to the credit and trade of the [British] kingdom” in Anomabu.⁵⁷ Just as on the Gold Coast, where “the Portuguese calls the Negro Chief, who is his Friend, Don Pedro, or Don Antonio; the English give him the familiar name of Jack or Tom; and the French shew their good breeding by more sounding appellations,” Halifax chose to dress Sessarakoo in British clothing. His English name was William. As *The Royal African* pointed out, “all mean the same thing at bottom, which is to fix the *Negro* [...]

absolutely in their particular interest."⁵⁸ Laura Brown has suggested that Sessarakoo and his companion were "stripped of their own clothing and dressed in carefully designed attire" merely to "signify their nobility, both of status and nature."⁵⁹ This is true, but it should also be remembered that the cold logic of slave trade mercantilism lay at the heart of such significations.

This does not mean that mid-eighteenth century Britain's obsession with pathos had no place in Sessarakoo's story. Indeed, perhaps the most enduring episode of his tour of Britain was the one most steeped in affective potential: his appearance at Covent Garden Theatre on 1 February 1749. The *Gentleman's Magazine* reported on the story at the end of the same month:

They appear sometimes at the theatres, and particularly on the 1st inst. were at Covent Garden, to see the tragedy of *Oroonoko*. They were received with a loud clap of applause, which they acknowledge with a very genteel bow, and took their seats in a box. The seeing persons of their own colour on the stage, apparently in the same distress from which they had been so lately delivered, the tender interview between *Imoinda* and *Oroonoko*, who was betrayed by the treachery of a captain, his account of his sufferings, and the repeated abuse of his placability and confidence, strongly affected them with the generous grief which pure nature always feels, and which art had not yet taught them to suppress; the young prince was so far overcome, that he was obliged to leave at the end of the fourth act. His companion remained, but wept the whole time; a circumstance which affected the audience yet more than the play, and doubled the tears which were shed for *Oroonoko* and *Imoinda*.⁶⁰

As several scholars have noted, in this report, the affective spectacle taking place onstage was exceeded by the one in the box.⁶¹ In contrast to *The Royal African*, this depiction of Sessarakoo required him to take on sufficient empathetic weight to truly mirror Oroonoko's story. The nascent mythos of the noble savage now had to be invoked. While the RAC had learned, to their repeated financial cost, that "art" had in fact taught Fante mercantile communities to "suppress" their true thoughts quite well, Sessarakoo and his companion were repainted here as innocents: unlearned and helpless victims of unrestrained mercenary avarice. Thus, even while their relatively rarefied social rank was emphasised, the two young visitors were nonetheless seen as exhibiting "pure nature" in their emotional response to Oroonoko's story.

Southerne's adaptation of Behn's novel remained popular in the eighteenth century partially because in its hero British audiences could witness the combination of two prevalent cultural topoi: the native prince and the innocent sufferer. As Horace Walpole observed, certain elements of Sessarakoo's story—at least as it was told in Britain—very closely resembled the plot of Southerne's play.⁶² Oroonoko, "son and heir to the great King of *Angola*," was tricked into slavery by an amoral British slave trader who "did design to carry him to England, to have show'd him there," but instead sold him in the Americas.⁶³ He was purchased by a benevolent planter named Blandford, who resented the captain's "unheard-of villainy."⁶⁴ However, unlike Sessarakoo, no honourable RAC officials interceded to rescue Oroonoko. The conventions of late seventeenth-century romantic tragedy were satisfied by the

introduction of a doomed love affair. With help from Blandford and another slave named Aboan, Oroonoko was reunited with his lover Imoinda, a white woman raised in Angola and now a slave at a neighbouring plantation. After a failed escape attempt and several fight scenes, Aboan, Oroonoko and Imoinda all committed suicide in a climactic scene of emotional sentimentality.⁶⁵ The play remained spectacularly popular throughout much of the eighteenth century, and was performed “at least 315 times” between 1696 and 1800.⁶⁶

It might be reasonable to assume that such an invitation to sympathise with the enslaved might lead to questions regarding the morality of the Transatlantic slave trade. Indeed, later versions of the play, such as the one written by John Hawkesworth in 1759, have been identified as early contributions (though not particularly effective ones) to growing abolitionist sentiment in Britain.⁶⁷ But the version Sessarakoo saw in 1749—Southerne’s “original” 1696 adaptation, starring Dennis Delane in blackface—sentimentalised the titular hero’s suffering under slavery without any suggestion that the overarching system itself was morally wrong.⁶⁸ One contemporaneous critic identified that Oroonoko’s suffering was only legitimised by his exceptional social and personal nobility—that is, what made him *different* from other slaves. Describing a scene in which Oroonoko’s friend Aboan encouraged him to rebel against his captivity, the reviewer recounted how “he only breathes out expressions of pity” when he hears of torture perpetrated against “the other slaves.” But then, “at last, (to awake his sleeping spirit) Aboan asks if young princes and heirs of empire are to be born in a state of slavery, in order to pamper the pride of their barbarous masters.”⁶⁹ This, along with the thought of his own heir being born a slave, is what finally galvanised Oroonoko into taking action. It was the prospect of a wrongly disrupted aristocratic bloodline, and not the violence inherent in slavery, which ultimately roused the sentimental hero’s righteous indignation.

Thus the sympathetic outpouring of tears in the audience at Covent Garden was based not on the extension of emotional identification to African people but an acknowledgement of traditional social hierarchies. The superior personal qualities identified in *The Royal African* not only made Sessarakoo, like Oroonoko, unfit for slavery, but the natural sensitivity to emotional distress supposedly generated by his good breeding led him to suffer under it in a heightened way which was understood, crucially, as exceptional. Popular mid-century attitudes towards the majority of Africans were articulated by one commentator who in 1764 declared that the “rigour and severity” of West Indian slavery was “absolutely necessary to make them useful.”⁷⁰ As Christopher Brown points out, although racism as a pseudo-science did not develop until the early nineteenth century, “assumptions about racial difference would limit the development of a sincere concern for Africans throughout the eighteenth century.”⁷¹ Ironically, sentimentalised and sensationalised stories about wrongly-enslaved royal Africans supported these ill-defined notions of ethnic alterity by attesting to the “natural” differences between those who should and should not be enslaved. George Boulukos has defined this “Oroonoko effect” as the “representational habit of singling out favoured African potentates for praise, and giving it in

terms that explicitly invoke comparisons to European nobility.⁷² Popular British representations of African nobility emphasised their protagonists' intrinsic similitude to Europeans at the same time as pointing out the all-important differences between them and the vast majority of Africans.

These distinctions presented themselves in portrayals of Sessarakoo just as they had in *Oroonoko*. In *The Royal African*, for example, the "young prince" was described as considering himself worse off than any other slave specifically because of his royal status: "He saw numbers in the like condition, from a variety of accidents, but none of them in any degree comparable to that which had brought this heavy lot upon him. [...] His innocence afforded him the only consolation; it was a satisfaction that he had not drawn this upon himself."⁷³ Readers were to understand that the prince did not deserve enslavement in the same way that other African slaves did. Moreover, this version of Sessarakoo went on to demonstrate his heroic worth by acting as the very model of sentimental masculinity, bearing his undeserved ill fortune like a man: "Neither time nor these transient comforts, could so far dissipate the sense of his condition, as to remove that melancholy which followed his first consternation; but as this was not attended with any tincture of sullenness or obstinacy, it rather heightened than abated his other good qualities, which gained him universal esteem, while in the low state of a slave."⁷⁴ Even though he had been enslaved, Sessarakoo's naturally noble qualities were irrepressible. In this case, they were manifested in the execution of his slave duties in exemplary fashion, without "sullenness or obstinacy."

The depiction of Sessarakoo as a sentimental hero, and his being contrasted with the majority of black slaves in British colonies, reached its apogee with the publication of Dodd's poems "The African Prince" and "Zara's Answer" in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1749, and then again as part of a pamphlet in 1755.⁷⁵ These poems took the form of an (imagined) exchange of love letters, written in verse, between Sessarakoo and a fictitious princess named Zara in Anomabu. True to the conventions of mid-eighteenth century love poetry, Dodd's somewhat generic compositions elevated the declarative sentimentality of their subject by focusing on the prince's emotional rather than on his physical suffering. However, as Jane Spencer has acknowledged, "the pleasures of sympathizing with a distressed African prince could be enjoyed without criticizing the colonial practices that caused his problems" in these poems of "national, sentimental self-congratulation."⁷⁶ This in some measure accounted for the invention of Zara. If Sessarakoo was, to borrow Sypher's phrase, "an Oroonoko redivivus" in the British popular imagination, then he needed an Imoinda to fully occupy the mould of his noble, fictional forbear.⁷⁷ The nobility of the African prince was elevated by the strength of his feelings over being separated from his lover. This helped to redirect attention away from the ethically hazy political issue of slavery and towards the well-established cultural trope of the separated lovers. As Stephen Ahern has observed, such a focus on individual emotional pain allowed readers to "wallow in scenes of affective excess without interrogating the material conditions that gave rise to the suffering in the first place."⁷⁸ Dodd's poems primarily described an exotic

love story—not a story about the miseries inherent in slavery. More importantly, they formed part of the larger project of emphasising Sessarakoo’s nobility.

Of course, the trauma of slavery could not go entirely unacknowledged. But, just as in *Oroonoko* and *The Royal African*, the sentimental tension in Dodd’s poems lay in the contrast between his former position of social dignity and his new lowly situation as a slave. “The shouted prince is now a slave unknown,” the hero complained, “To watch his eye, no bending courtiers wait, /No hailing crowds proclaim his regal state; /A slave, condemn’d with unrewarded toil, /To turn, from morn to eve, a burning soil.” In her response, Zara joined in the lament, more forcefully attacking the affront to his inherited political power:

Bound were those limbs, ordain’d alone to prove
The toils of empire, and the sweets of love?
Hold, hold! Barbarians of the fiercest kind!
Fear heav’n’s red light’ning—’tis a prince ye bind;
A prince, whom no indignities could hide,
They knew, presumptuous! and the gods defy’d.⁷⁹

Like in *The Royal African*, Sessarakoo’s “ordain’d” nobility could not be hidden under the indignity of slavery. Meanwhile, the moral wrongness of enslaving a prince inverted one side of the primitivist black/white savage/civilised dyad: the British enslavers became “Barbarians of the fiercest kind” in the eyes of the African Zara, deserving of divine retribution.

In British reimaginations of Sessarakoo’s time in Barbados, the cultural refinement and sensibility of the hero was usually contrasted with the boorish behaviour and cruelty of the rest of the slave population. In Dodd’s poems, the affective potential of Sessarakoo’s emotional sensitivity was realised by having his fellow slaves mock his misery: “At night I migled with a wretched crew” the fictionalised prince recounted, “Who by long use with woe familiar grew; /Of manners brutish, merciless and rude, /They mock’d my suffrings, and my pangs renew’d.”⁸⁰ Similarly, *The Royal African* invited readers to imagine Sessarakoo’s reaction to “the rough usage that he met with from two slaves” when they rowed out to pick him up from the ship at Barbados.⁸¹ In both instances, the immediate source of the generic sentimental crisis of feeling came from the proximity of an aristocratic protagonist—one who was definitionally unfit for slavery—to an inherently enslavable set of interchangeable antagonists. The distress driving the affective scene was generated more by exposure to slaves than by slavery itself. Ultimately, this served to harden attitudes towards black slaves rather than question a lucrative branch of commerce which played such an important role in developing colonial ambitions in the British Atlantic world.

After their baptism in November, Sessarakoo and his companion spent another nine months in Britain. Either because they were busy with their studies or because London’s fashionable elite had grown bored of them, they did not appear in the British press again before they left aboard the HMS *Surprize* to return to Anomabu on 14 August 1750.⁸² As with most aspects of the visit, the circumstances and timing

of this return voyage proved beneficial for British trade in West Africa. The *Surprise* was not a trading vessel, but a man-of-war, directed to inspect the British forts on the West African coast as it made its way down to its station near Anomabu, eventually arriving on 6 April 1751.⁸³ This was an important task as encounters between British and French traders in the region were becoming increasingly hostile. On 17 March 1749, for example, a French brig anchored off the coast of Anomabu, intending to set up trade. Assuming that they held a monopoly in the region, a small group of RAC agents boarded the brig and demanded that the French leave. The brig's captain responded that "if any Treaty could be produced between his Brittish Majesty and the French King to the above Effect he woud immediately sail hence if not he woud trade here unless prevented by superior Force."⁸⁴ The directors of Cape Coast Castle responded with an order to "be very pressing with Currantee and particularly so at this Juncture and to repeat to him the great Generositys to his Son in England."⁸⁵ This tactic was effective, and when two French men-of-war, the *Content* and the *Auriflamme*, arrived on the coast in January 1751, Kurentzi refused to trade with them.⁸⁶

Once Sessarakoo arrived home safely, Kurentzi appeared finally to cast his lot in with the British traders. In July 1751, a letter from him was read before the Board of Admiralty in London, expressing "gratitude for the civilities shown his son" and promising "the assistance of 20,000 men, to build a fort on the Coast of Africa, in case any obstructions from the French should happen."⁸⁷ This was welcome news; reports had just come in that the French were preparing a small squadron at Brest to sail to Anomabu and once again attempt to secure rights to build their own fort there.⁸⁸ A plan was quickly drawn up to rebuild the British fort there, authorised by, among others, Halifax.⁸⁹ The governor of Cape Coast Castle, Thomas Melvil, drew up a treaty guaranteeing British exclusivity at Anomabu, which was signed by a number of Fante *caboceers* on 6 February 1752. One key signature was missing, however. Kurentzi was a skilled politician and a ruthless trader, and when the French arrived on the Gold Coast, he had entered into negotiations with them, again accepting gifts in exchange for his time. Early in 1752, he even sent another of his sons back to Paris aboard one of the French ships, the *Lys*.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, Sessarakoo had established himself as an independent trader and something of a Fante ambassador to the British at Anomabu, though British reports suggested that he, like Kurentzi, benefitted more from the arrangement than his trading partners.⁹¹ In the end, British naval power and "a very considerable expense" was required to settle colonial competition over trade at Anomabu. The Admiralty Board, by now impatient to settle the contest decisively, authorised the stationing of no fewer than five Royal Navy ships at Anomabu. Confronted with "the largest concentration of British naval force assembled in African waters," the French had no choice but to abandon their pretensions of establishing their own base for trade at the port.⁹² Meanwhile, the British set about rebuilding their own.

The RAC, succeeded in 1752 by the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, were allowed to continue in a key misconception about Sessarakoo for a full decade after his return to Anomabu: he was not, in fact, heir to Kurentzi's empire. They may have based their misjudgement of Sessarakoo's status on the fact that, as Shumway

points out, the Fante “claim to inherit their blood from their fathers,” and not from the maternal line as in most other Gold Coast cultures.⁹³ But Fante inheritance structures were (and are) extremely complex. Some of Kurentsi’s military authority descended to his eldest son, George Quasah, while much of his wealth and political responsibilities as *caboccer* passed down the matrilineal line to Amoony Coomah, “a relative whose exact relationship to Corrantee,” according to Sparks, remains “unclear.”⁹⁴ In both cases, the British had failed to inculcate any particularly special relationship, focusing their efforts instead on Sessarakoo. Once they realised the extent to which they had wasted their investment, their patience with him became very short. He was forcibly ejected from the British fort at Anomabu following an argument with a white official in 1761. He continued trading independently, and supported Kurentsi in his negotiations with the English until the elder *caboccer*’s death in 1764. The African Prince, immortalised in the fictions of aristocracy which he himself had helped to sustain, died “of unknown causes” in Anomabu, in 1770.⁹⁵ He had gained more material wealth from his visit to Britain than he ever stood to inherit from his father.

British retellings of Sessarakoo’s experiences of slavery did little to challenge prevalent notions of slave trading as a perfectly acceptable branch of Atlantic commerce. His putative status as a prince was emphasised in texts like *The Royal African* and Dodd’s poems in order to deflect potentially difficult questions surrounding the ethical legitimacy of buying and selling people. In the case of *The Royal African*, the villainy of enslaving a prince was seen as symptomatic of increasingly deregulated international trade on the eve of the disbanding of the RAC. The newer, more liberal economic model proposed for trade with Africa, the text argued, would lead to decreased emphasis on the promotion of intrinsic values by which Britain had been keen to identify itself on the international stage, such as honour and deference to traditional social hierarchy. Without a properly incorporated, royally-sponsored company at its head, Atlantic trade would begin to reflect Britain in a less flattering light. Sessarakoo’s enslavement was used as proof positive of the short-sightedness and vulgarity of free-marketism. Readers were to understand that, if left in the hands of hawkish, self-interested separate traders, Britain’s slave trade might one day become an unethical business. Newspaper and magazine reportage of the affair, meanwhile, was keen to accommodate Sessarakoo within pre-existing fictional models of black aristocratic nobility. Comparisons with Oroonoko were inevitable given the popularity of Southerne’s play, but the appearance at Covent-Garden in February 1749 realised the affective potential behind the familiarity of his story. Thus, in Dodd’s poems, his noble status became not only an issue for mercantile concern, but also the key factor in both the generation of sympathy in the white readership and the enactment of difference from the vast majority of black slaves.

It was through these retellings that British audiences were able to indulge in scenes of Sessarakoo’s emotional distress while actively hardening themselves to the baser sufferings of the majority of slaves in Britain’s West Indian colonies. Of course, the notion of Sessarakoo as a blameless victim of one captain’s mercenary avarice, as

perpetuated in British representations of him, was a fiction. The scenes of his suffering, which so affected British audiences, could not have come about without the material conditions of Transatlantic slavery that he himself helped to generate and sustain. Before being tricked and sold in Barbados, he was an important cog in Kurentzi's slave-trading machine. Upon his return to Anomabu, he went into the business for himself.⁹⁶ But a second fiction—namely, that he would inherit his father's wealth and power—helps to account for British readiness to accept the first. In turn, the abruptness with which British performances of esteem ceased after their discovery of Sessarakoo's modest expectations exposes some of the larger, more fundamental fictions used to justify Britain's involvement in Transatlantic slavery.

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Notes

- * Ryan Hanley is Salvesen Junior Fellow in History at New College Oxford. (ryan.hanley@new.ox.ac.uk)
- 1 Sparks, *Where the Negroes are Masters*, 4.
 - 2 Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 76, 55.
 - 3 See, for example, Anon., *The Royal African*, v.
 - 4 Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa*, 65, 57; Sparks, *Where the Negroes are Masters*, 35–6.
 - 5 Kurentisi and Eukobah's son was named Anseh Sessarakoo after his maternal great-uncle. *Ibid.*, 38.
 - 6 Briton Hammon's 1760 *Narrative* is usually considered the first piece of published Anglophone black autobiography, though Ukawsaw Gronniosaw's 1772 *Narrative* was the first to deploy many of the tropes and trends by which the genre is often identified. Jacobus Capitein's proslavery 'political-theological' postgraduate thesis, *Num Libertati Christianae Servitus Adverstur, Nec Ne?, [Is slavery compatible with Christian Freedom, or Not?]* is the earliest known European-language published text by a black author. Hammon, *Narrative*; Gronniosaw, *Narrative*; Capitein, *Agony of Asar*.
 - 7 Carretta, "William Anseh Sessarakoo."
 - 8 Anon., *The Royal African*; Dodd, *The African Prince*.
 - 9 Fryer, *Staying Power*, 423–4; Newman, *A New World of Labour*, 11; Bindman, "Subjectivity and Slavery in Portraiture," 81–2; Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 285–6; Carretta, "Venture Smith, One of a Kind," 166–7; Sparks, *Where the Negroes are Masters*, 1–3, 45–51; Spencer, *Aphra Behn's Afterlife*, 238–9.
 - 10 Sypher, *Guinea's Captive Kings*; Sypher, "The African Prince in London," 237–44.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, esp. Bindman, "Subjectivity and Slavery in Portraiture," 81–2.
 - 12 Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 284–8; see also Sypher, "The African Prince in London," 245–7.
 - 13 See Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 75–81; Newton, "Slavery, Sea Power and the State," 183–8.
 - 14 Sparks, *Where the Negroes are Masters*, 35–67.
 - 15 Hayes, *Importance of Effectually Supporting the Royal African Company*, 33.
 - 16 Sparks, *Where the Negroes are Masters*, 35.
 - 17 Richardson, "Cultures of Exchange," 156.
 - 18 Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 53.

- 19 Sparks, *Where the Negroes are Masters*, 43–4.
- 20 Anon., *The Royal African*, 44.
- 21 *Ibid.*, iii.
- 22 Sparks, *Where the Negroes are Masters*, 46.
- 23 *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, “Voyage ID=27205.”
- 24 TNA, Treasury Board Papers, T/70/1476, “Letters to, from, and relating to John Roberts,” 34.
- 25 TNA, “Report upon the Memorial to Build a Fort at Annamabo in 1752,” Commonwealth Office Papers, CO/267/5; “The Traders to Africa to the King,” in Donnan, *Documents*, vol. 2, 468.
- 26 Dodd, *The Royal African*, 1.
- 27 *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, “Voyage ID=90112.”
- 28 Pettigrew, *Freedom’s Debt*, 153–77.
- 29 See, for example, Anon., *Case of the Royal African Company*, 31–47.
- 30 Pettigrew, *Freedom’s Debt*, 176.
- 31 House of Lords, *An Act for Allowing Further Time*, 1091–6.
- 32 Anon., *The Royal African*, 30–1.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 34 Pettigrew, *Freedom’s Debt*, 180.
- 35 Anon., *The Royal African*, 43.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 See, for example, Schmidgen, “Illegitimacy and Social Observation,” 134, 133–66; Zunshine, *Bastards and Foundlings*, 1–22.
- 43 Anon., *The Royal African*, 49.
- 44 Andrew Beaumont, *Colonial America and the Earl of Halifax*, 49.
- 45 *Whitehall Evening Post*, 24 January 1749, 4.
- 46 *The Gentlemen’s Magazine*, 19:2 (1749), 89–90.
- 47 *London Gazetteer*, 2 March 1749, 2; Anon., *The Royal African*.
- 48 Walpole, *Correspondence*, vol. 9: 81; 20: 56.
- 49 *The Morning Advertiser*, 16 June 1749, 3.
- 50 *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 19:7 (1749), 323–25; 19:8 (1749), 372–73.
- 51 Sparks, *Where the Negroes are Masters*
- 52 Spencer, *Aphra Behn’s Afterlife*, 238.
- 53 *The Morning Advertiser*, 16 June 1749, 3; *Whitehall Evening Post*, 24 January 1749, 4; *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 19:2 (1749), 90.
- 54 *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 19:2 (1749), 90.
- 55 For accounts of Diallo’s visit, see Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 1–11; Grant, *The Fortunate Slave*, 61–200; Bluett, *Some Memoirs*.
- 56 For a detailed analysis of Mai’s visit, see Hackforth-Jones, “Mai/Omai in London,” 13–30.
- 57 *The Newcastle General Magazine*, 2:1 (1749), 51.
- 58 Anon., *The Royal African*, 21.
- 59 Brown, *Fables of Modernity*, 184.
- 60 *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 19:2 (1749), 90.
- 61 See, for example, Spencer, *Aphra Behn’s Afterlife*, 239; Brown, *Fables of Modernity*, 184.
- 62 “There are two black princes of Anamaboe here, who are in fashion at all the assemblies, of whom I scarce know any particulars, though their story is very like Oroonoko’s: all the women know it, and ten times more than belongs to it.” Walpole, *Correspondence*, vol. 20: 40.
- 63 Southerne, *Oroonoko*, 13.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 65 *Ibid.*, 74–84.
- 66 Jaher, “Paradoxes of Slavery,” 51, 66n1.
- 67 Carey, “‘To Force a Tear,’” 110–18.
- 68 *Newcastle General Magazine*, 2:2 (1749), 96.
- 69 *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 22:4 (1752), 165–6.
- 70 *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 34:10 (1764), 493.
- 71 Brown, *Moral Capital*, 51.

- 72 Boulukos, *The Grateful Slave*, 46.
- 73 Anon., *The Royal African*, 41.
- 74 *Ibid.*, 41–2.
- 75 *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 19:7 (1749), 323–5; 19:8 (1749), 372–3; Dodd, *The African Prince*. Future references to these poems are to the second, standalone edition.
- 76 Spencer, *Aphra Behn's Afterlife*, 238, 239.
- 77 Sypher, "The African Prince in London," 243.
- 78 Ahern, "Bonds of Sentiment," 3.
- 79 Dodd, *The African Prince*, 7, 16.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 81 Anon., *The Royal African*, 40.
- 82 Carretta, "William Ansah Sessarakoo."
- 83 *London Evening Post*, 18 August 1750, 4.
- 84 TNA, Treasury Board Papers, T70/1194.
- 85 *Ibid.*
- 86 Newton, "Slavery, Sea Power and the State," 184.
- 87 *London Evening Post*, 3 August 1751, 1.
- 88 Newton, "Slavery, Sea Power and the State," 184.
- 89 TNA, Commonwealth Office Papers CO/267/5, "Report upon the Memorial to Build a Fort at Annamabo in 1752."
- 90 *London Evening Post*, 12 May 1752, 2.
- 91 Sparks, *Where the Negroes are Masters*, 59, 62.
- 92 Newton, "Slavery, Sea Power and the State," 186.
- 93 Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 16.
- 94 Sparks, *Where the Negroes are Masters*, 66.
- 95 Carretta, "William Ansah Sessarakoo."
- 96 Fryer, *Staying Power*, 424.