

Anthony Appiah & the racism in his work – part2

APPIAH & MONBODDO

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This is the second of a multi-part article on the racism in Anyhony Appiah's work. This short article will focus on his normalisation of racism in a specific instance in a specific work *Colour Conscious* (Appiah & Gutman, 1996)

Normalisation of racism

This discussion may be distasteful but Appiah has thrown down the gauntlet. Appiah commits his racism by sleight of hand. To understand how he does this one needs to address and clarify certain issues in advance:

- i) to repeat a libel or slander is to commit a further libel/slander,
- ii) to strive to create an environment where slanderous/libellous statements are normalised is to commit a far greater crime.

The Libel:

Appiah quotes Jefferson :

'...as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black woman over those of his own species'.(Appiah & Gutman, 1996, p. 44)

There is no discussion of where this idea came from nor what role this claim had in the work of the well known racist James Burnet, Lord Momboddo. Momboddo was famous (or notorious) for his tales such as Orangutans enslaving black women etc and the African woman feeling honoured by the attention. This piece of vicious racism was of no direct relevance to Appiah's present argument so its inclusion was arbitrary, unnecessary and therefore deliberate. Here we have step 1 - **the repetition of the libel.**

But Appiah goes further. At no point does he suggest that the comments were outrageous (even people at the time expressed such an outrage) but rather he endorses these discussions by commending the passage as: "...so conspicuously fair and balanced discussion'. (p.46) and these thoughts as coming from 'the best thinking of his day' (p.47). Academics today go out of their way when discussing Lord Monboddo to explicitly deplore his racism. (Marzluf, 2008, p. 389) This then is the normalisation of libel, seeking to make it 'normal' to discuss whether or not apes prefer African women to fellow apes, to see this as a legitimate topic for discussion. At this point one could say we move from libel to criminal libel or an analogous distinction.

Appiah then takes the rhetorical device of ‘on the one hand ... on the other ...’ as proof of the sagacity of the writer. He writes: ‘And the judiciousness of his tone here adds, of course, greatly to the weight of his negative judgments’.(Appiah & Gutman, 1996, p. 45) This of course is absurd.

To put this into full context consider the Jewish blood libel - that Jews used the blood of Christian children for ritual purposes. Jefferson was writing in a period where the art of rhetoric was greatly valued so the skill in judicious presentation was a prized attainment. Imagine that an author wrote about allegations of Jewish ritual sacrifice as follows using the then accepted rhetorical flourishes:

There are on the one hand many such allegations over the centuries from many different countries and different religions and one must say there is seldom smoke without fire; on the other hand there is evidence of anti Jewish sentiment which would suggest that some allegations would be fabricated and some would be exaggerated, so standing back and seeking a balanced view one would suggest that it would be reasonable to conclude that there were many incidents of Jews killing locals using their blood for rituals but that the numbers had improved on the retelling, and those who denied everything were most probably either Jews or friends of the Jews and acting out of particular interest....

According to Appiah’s approach this nasty piece of anti semitism is in fact an enlightened evaluation after careful judicious consideration of the evidence.

Bestiality

It is important to recognise that Monboddo’s comments are not primarily about bestiality as such. Consider a Japanese scholar who takes evidence of bestiality in Western women (Note 1) and quotes a Japanese author who suggests that Western women were therefore no different than dogs, while distancing himself personally from the opinion nevertheless considers it an appropriate matter for discussion in his class without any expression of outrage etc That would be outrageous enough.

However what Monboddo and this quote is getting at is something far graver. Momboddo’s comments themselves were not so much accusations of bestiality - such has been recorded and condemned throughout history see Singer (Singer, 2001) - but a suggestion that there was no moral distance between certain women and orangutans in the eyes of either party - this was considered outrageous suggestion by many in his time.

It is equivalent to a Japanese scholar quoting a Japanese text making such suggestions about Korean, Chinese and Western women/white women. - that these women were morally no different than dogs and that they, the women of Korea, China and the West, considered sexual advances from animals to be an honour. This conduct in a modern academic classroom would clearly be seen as unequivocal evidence of deep racial hatred.

Most curiously one wonders where this leaves Appiah's own sisters? Is he happy for the class to consider whether or not they would happily engage in a sexual encounter with a local orangutan and consider it normal or even, as Lombodo suggests - be proud of their conquest and honoured by the attention? Would his sisters ever talk to him again?

Some may argue that it is inconceivable that a person with visible African descent would harbour such views. This however would be somewhat naive. Jews during the period of the Inquisition converted and then decried their own with vicious lies. These Jews were known as 'conversos'. As Henry Lea put it; they **'sowed the wind and reaped the whirlwind'** (the Inquisition) (Lea, 1906, p. 166).

Conversos

Consider the behaviour of the 'conversos', those Jews who abandoned their Jewish identity for the opportunities provided by becoming Christian. Lea sums up the situation:

'That they should hate, with an exceeding hatred, those who had proved true to the faith amid tribulation was inevitable. The renegade is apt to be bitterer against those whom he has abandoned than is the opponent by birthright ..' (Lea, 1906, p. 163) More fully he wrote:

"Many chiefs of the synagogue, learned rabbis and leaders of their people, had cowered before the storm and had embraced Christianity. Whether their conversion was sincere or not, they had broken with the past and, with the keen intelligence of their race, they could see that a new career was open to them in which energy and capacity could gratify ambition unfettered by the limitations surrounding them in Judaism. That they should hate, with an exceeding hatred, those who had proved true to the faith amid tribulation was inevitable. The renegade is apt to be bitterer against those whom he has abandoned than is the opponent by birthright and, in such a case as this, consciousness of the contempt felt by the steadfast children of Israel for the weaklings and worldlings who had apostatized from the faith of their fathers gave a keener edge to enmity. From early times the hardest blows endured by Judaism had always been dealt by its apostate children, whose training had taught them the weakest points to assail and whose necessity of self-justification led them to attack these mercilessly. In 1085, Rabbi Samuel of Morocco came from Fez and was baptized at Toledo, when he wrote a tract to justify himself which had great currency throughout the middle ages. (Lea, 1906, p. 162)

We have today a modern equivalent of the 'conversos' in the Black community. Many have been carefully identified by Houston Baker in "Betrayal" (Baker, 2008) . Anthony Appiah clearly falls in this class.

Notes:

1. Bestiality in women can be evidenced: (“Tempe woman gets probation for bestiality,” 2018) ; (“Woman has sex with wiener,” 2016) ; (“First person to be convicted of bestiality jailed for disgusting behaviour with pet | World | News | Express.co.uk,” 2017)

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