

# Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko: or, The Royal Slave*

Dr. Alan Haffa

# Aphra Behn (1640-89)

- Unknown origins; father may have been a barber named Johnson
- May have travelled to Surinam in 1663 where her father died; she would have learned about the slave trade first hand
- Married to a merchant for less than a year; this is where she got the surname “Behn”
- She was a monarchist and worked as a spy for Charles II in the Netherlands
- Debtor’s prison
- She wrote plays for a living
- *Oroonoko* published in 1688



# Virginia Woolf and Behn

- *A Room of One's Own*: All women together, ought to let flowers fall upon the grave of Aphra Behn... for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds...
- The first woman writer to make a living from her writing
- Why women writers chose the novel?
  - Open-ended form that didn't require formal schooling
  - Novel emphasizes character

# Plot Summary

- Oroonoko tells her his story in Guiana to Narrator
- Successful in battle, he falls in love with Imoinda and they marry. She also catches the eye of the king, is brought to the King's harem. Imoinda and Oroonoko secretly make love; she is sold as a slave by King when he discovers
- Oroonoko, a slave-owner himself, despairs and nearly is defeated in battle by Jamoan's army
- Lured upon an English ship by a captain with whom he previously had bought and sold slaves, Oroonoko and all his men are betrayed and taken as slaves to Guiana.
- There he is reunited with Imoinda; he kills a Tiger with a sword
- He rebels against his masters and leads an army of ex-slaves seeking freedom.
- He is caught, tortured, and then kills Imoinda herself (to save her from violation), and is finally executed by dismemberment.

# Genre: Influence of Medieval Romance, Epic and Tragedy

- The novel had not been invented
- She draws upon previous prose narrative genres for models
- How does Oroonoko's life also resemble romance? (Think Lancelot, Guinevere and Arthur)
- For instance, both romance and epic heroes sometimes face foes described as monstrous (Beowulf and Grendel; Odysseus and Polyphemus).
- He is a tragic hero in that he is noble, but yet he ends up being defeated.
- What is unique is the insertion of the first person narrator

# Narrative Voice: Seeks Trust and Asserts Historical Mode

- “I do not pretend in giving you the History of this Royal Slave, to entertain my Reader with Adventures of a feign’d Hero, whose Life and Fortunes Fancey may manage at the Poet’s pleasure; nor in relating the Truth, design to adorn it with any Accidents, but such as arrived in earnest to him: And it shall come simply into the World, recommended by its own proper Merits, and natural Intrigues; there being enough of Reality to support it, and to render it diverting, without the addition of Invention.

I was myself an Eye-witness to a great part of what you wind here set down; and what I cou’d not be Witness of, I receiv’d from the Mouth of the chief Actor in this History...”

# European Idea of Beauty

- Description of Oroonoko: "The most famous Statuary cou'd not form the Figure of a Man more admirably turn'd from head to foot...His Nose was rising and *Roman*, instead of *African* and flat. His Mouth, the finest shap'd that could be seen...The whole Proportion and Air of his Face was so noble, and exactly form'd, that, bating his Colour, there cou'd be nothing in Nature more beautiful, agreeable, and handsome" (13).
- This method of characterizing her heroes was necessary to make a European audience sympathize with them.
- If she had described tribal scarring they would be seen as inhuman and uncivilized

# Nature and Civilization

- Idea of Natural Man derived from Milton's Adam and Eve
- Description of the Native Americans; they wear aprons of woven flowers "as Adam and Eve did the Fig-Leaves"
- "And though they are all thus naked, if one lives for ever among 'em, there is not to be seen an undecent Action, or Glance: and being continually us'd to see on another so unadorn'd, so like our first Parents before the Fall, it seems as if they had no Wishes, there being nothing to heighten Curiosity;"

# Native Americas as Noble Savage

- “And these people represented to me an absolute Idea of the first State of Innocence, before Man knew how to sin: And tis most evident and plain that simple Nature is the most harmless, inoffensive and vertuous Mistress. Tis she alone, if she were permitted, that better instructs the World than all the Inventions of Man: Religion wou’d here but destroy that Tranquillity they possess by Ignorance, and Laws wou’d but teach ‘em to know Offence, of which now they have no Notion.”
- Example of Governor Lying to them—they have no word for lying.

# Oroonoko as Distinguished from Native Americans

- He has the nobility of “real Greatness of Soul” (note, Aristotle)
- The narrator wonders where he could get notions of Honor, Generosity, Softness, passions of Love and Gallantry
- His French tutor teaches “Morals, Language and Science” and he meets the English and Spanish slavers and learns their language
- He has the natural nobility of Natural Man mixed with the sophistication and softness of Civilized Europeans

# Oroonoko Abhors Regicide

- “He had heard and admired the Romans: He had heard of the Late Civil Wars in England and the deplorable Death of our great Monarch; and would discourse of it with all the Sense and Abhorrence of the Injustice imaginable. He had extreme good and graceful Mien, and all the civility of a well-bred great Man. He had nothing of Barbarity in his Nature, but in all Points address’d himself as if his Education had been in some European court.”

# Epic Values: Honor

- Embassy is sent on behalf of King to Oroonoko after Imoinda affair, like Agamemnon and Achilles
- But like Achilles distraught with Briseis gone, Oroonoko lies on his carpet and will not fight
- He disdains Glory now; but his friend, Aboan, goes to fight in his place
- He returns to battle when he hears his friends fighting: “he had not the Constancy of Grief to that degree as to make him insensible to the Danger of his Army”
- He goes out wearing things that “make him shine with most Splendor, to strike a reverend Awe into the Beholders”—like Achilles with the armor of the gods

# Innocence of Natural Man

- Oroonoko has epic values of classical hero, and love and chivalry of Medieval knight. He has the softness of a civilized man. But he has the innocence of Natural Man.
- Ship Captain tricks him into coming on his boat and there he is made a slave
- He threatens to starve himself but again the captain lies and tells him that he will set him free at the first port if he will eat
- “And Oroonoko, whose Honor was such as he never had violated a Word in his Life himself, much less a solemn Asservation, believ’d in an instant what this Man said...”
- Oroonoko is the best of Civilized and Natural Man

# Governor Byam Lies to Oroonoko

- They tell him he won't be punished and that his child will be born free
- “But Caesar told him, there was no Faith in the White Men, or the Gods they ador'd; who instructed them in Principles so false, that honest men could not live amongst them... That he knew what he had to do when he dealt with Men of Honor; with with them a Man ought to be eternally on his guard, and never to eat and drink with Christians, without his Weapon of Defence in his hand;”
- But he is whipped by slaves back at the Plantation and “Indian Pepper” rubbed in the wounds

# Tragic Deaths: Tragic Mode

- After Imoinda pleads for death, “He (grieved to death) yet pleased as her noble Resolution, took her up, and embracing of her with all the Passion and Languishment of a dying Lover, drew his Knife to kill this Treasure of his soul, this Pleasure of his Eyes; while Tears trickled down his Cheeks, her were smiling with joy she should die by so noble a Hand and be sent into her own country (for that’s their notion of the next World) by him she so tenderly loved, and so truly ador’d in this”
- When her body is discovered, the English call Oroonoko a “Monster! That hast murder’d thy Wife” Yet, they lack the ethical framework to judge him

# His Death is that of a Martyr, Christ-like

- Smoking his pipe they dismember him
- Even as his members are cut off and throw in a fire, he smokes and says nothing. “They hacked off one of his Arms, and still he bore up, and held his Pipe; but at the cutting off the other Arm, his Head sunk, and his Pipe dropt and he gave up the Ghost, without a Groan, or a Reproach. My Mother and Sister were by him all the while, but not suffer’d to save him; so rude and wild were the Rabble and so inhuman were the Justices...”
- Recalls the women in Matthew 24
- Recalls the Stoicism of a Roman

# Conclusion

- Oroonoko is more noble than the other Africans (who abandon the rebellion and betray him), more noble than the Europeans (who are treacherous, liars, brutes and without Honor)
- He has the Natural Goodness of the Indians—Honor, Bravery, and Honesty, but he has the softness and sophistication of the Europeans
- The novel challenges the duality of Nature and Civilization through his character
- It blends Romance, Epic and Drama
- Slavery is shown to be a degradation of human nature, making both Slaves and Slavers less human and more Bestial