

Literature Criticism  
from 1400 to 1800

LC 237

Volume 237

# Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800

Critical Discussion of the Works  
of Fifteenth-, Sixteenth-, Seventeenth-, and  
Eighteenth-Century Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Philosophers, and Other Creative Writers

**Lawrence J. Trudeau**  
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# Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800

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# Aphra Behn

## 1640?-1689

(Born Eaffrey Johnson; also wrote under the pseudonyms Astrea and Astraea) English playwright, novelist, poet, and translator.

The following entry provides criticism of Behn's life and works. For additional information about Behn, see *LC*, Volumes 1 and 30; for additional information about the novel *Oroonoko*, see *LC*, Volume 42; for additional information about the play *The Rover*, see *LC*, Volume 135.

### INTRODUCTION

The first English woman known to have earned a living as a writer, Aphra Behn began her literary career as a playwright in the cutthroat, male world of Restoration stage drama. In her later years, she enjoyed further success as a novelist and a poet. Lauded today for her satiric wit, her criticism of seventeenth-century gender norms, and the implicit politics of much of her work, she was censured during her own lifetime and for centuries thereafter for her engagement in the "unfeminine" profession of literature and for the sexual content of many of her works. Critics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries complained that both Behn and her works were improper, unfeminine, and immoral, concurring with the judgment of eighteenth-century English poet Alexander Pope in *The First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace, Imitated* (1737), "The stage how loosely does Astræa tread, / Who fairly puts all Characters to bed."

Behn's reputation was redeemed in the twentieth century, when she was rediscovered by Modernist women writers looking to the past for models. The English writer Virginia Woolf famously asserted in *A Room of One's Own*, her 1929 manifesto about women and writing, that women writers "ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, . . . for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds." Her plays were popular, and her novel *Oroonoko* (1688) is frequently cited as an early model of the novel form. Regarded also as an important articulation of contemporary race relations and the complicated state of early colonial ideology, the book is frequently discussed for its treatment of gender and race. Recent criticism has also turned to Behn's dramatic works, viewing them as commentaries on the tumultuous English political changes of the seventeenth century and expressions of Behn's staunch royalism.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Little is known of Behn's early years. A biography published with *The Histories and Novels of the Late Ingenious Mrs. Behn* (1696) is now considered unreliable, as is the identity she created for herself as the narrator of *Oroonoko*. Based on documentary evidence, it appears possible that she was born in approximately 1640 and was the daughter of a barber in Canterbury, England, Bartholomew Johnson, and that her name was Eaffrey. This statement contradicts accounts of her birth to a lieutenant governor of Surinam, though it appears she arrived in Surinam in 1663 and was involved in colonial politics, possibly in some intelligence role. After her return to London in 1664, Behn probably married a merchant of German heritage, Johan Behn, though it appears he died or they were separated before long.

A staunch supporter of the Stuart kings, Behn entered the historical record as a spy for the Crown. A set of eighteen papers held in the Public Record Office in London establishes that she spent the year 1666 in Antwerp, Belgium, assessing the Dutch military threat and collecting information on expatriate Englishmen suspected of disloyalty. Despite working for the government, she remained penniless and borrowed money to return home in late 1666. Unable to repay that debt, it appears that she was threatened with debtor's prison in 1668, though it is unclear whether or not she was arrested or found a way to repay the debt. By 1670, she began to write dramatic works, possibly with the encouragement and aid of the London playwright and theater manager Thomas Killigrew. It was a bold and unusual decision, as most of the female writers of the period were gentlewomen who wrote privately for themselves or for a small group of intimates.

Flouting contemporary mores, Behn debuted *The Forc'd Marriage* with the house company at the Duke's Theatre in 1670. The play was a surprising success, and she became the house playwright, with more than a dozen of her plays performed over the next twelve years, most notably *The Rover* (1677) and *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678). In 1682, however, she used the theater as an opportunity to criticize the notorious antiroyalist Duke of Monmouth, the illegitimate son of Charles II, and was arrested. After her arrest, Behn's productivity declined, as did demand for plays because of a consolidation of theater companies and a glut of available works. In her later years, she wrote only four plays, but she launched a second career as a novelist, poet, and translator. The work for which she remains best known, *Oroonoko*, was one of the last published during her lifetime. Despite

her commercial success, she was never financially stable, and her poverty was likely a factor in the prolonged illness that led to her death in 1689. She was buried in Westminster Abbey.

## MAJOR WORKS

Between 1670 and 1682, Behn produced the dramatic works that made her famous. Her first play, *The Forc'd Marriage*, tells the story of a young woman whose father coerces her to marry for his own economic benefit. This plot exposes Behn's view of the emotional damage wreaked by patriarchal society. The themes it introduces—love, seduction, betrayal, honor, dishonor, and social and familial pressures—recur in Behn's other plays, including *The Rover*, one of her most successful and most renowned. In this play, and also in *Sir Patient Fancy*, *The Town Fop* (1676), *The Second Part of The Rover* (1681), *The False Count* (1681), and *The Emperor of the Moon* (1687), Behn satirized the more absurd aspects of contemporary high society and demonstrated the wit and humor for which she has become known.

Behn's novels are also concerned with love, seduction, infidelity, and the individual and familial pressures that complicate interpersonal relationships. Her first novel, *Love-Letters between a Noble-Man and His Sister* (1684–87), is composed of fictional letters relating the affairs of a Huguenot prince, Cesario; his companion, Philander; and Philander's sister-in-law, Silvia. After Philander seduces and deserts the young Silvia, her heart grows cold and her behavior turns profligate. She defies male authority for much of the novel, but in the end, she submits to Philander's authority in order to win his love. Contemporary viewers were meant to recognize Philander and Silvia as loose fictionalizations of Lord Grey of Werke, an active supporter of the Duke of Monmouth, and his sister-in-law Lady Henrietta Berkeley. The exiled Duke of Monmouth, whom Whigs supported as heir to James II, was executed in 1685 after an unsuccessful assault on royal forces. Behn's criticism of Philander and Silvia was thus read as a criticism of the Whigs. *The Fair Jilt* (1688) also features a woman who is generous with her sexual affections but stingy with her heart and whose love affair with Prince Tarquin, who proves to be an imposter, eventually destroys him. Later novels—including *The History of the Nun* (1689) and *The Lucky Mistake* (1689), as well as *The Unfortunate Bride*, *The Wandering Beauty*, *The Dumb Virgin*, and *The Unhappy Mistake*, which were published posthumously in *Histories, Novels, and Translations, Written by the Most Ingenious Mrs. Behn* (1700)—address similar themes of love betrayed, virtue, and the drama of intimate relationships.

*Oroonoko* is set in the British colony of Surinam, with parts detailing the hero's earlier life and capture in the fictionalized West African kingdom of Coramantien. Nar-

rated by a fictional version of Behn herself, who claims to have witnessed the events portrayed, the story follows Oroonoko, a prince of Cormantien (the European term for the Akan people who resided in present-day Ghana), whose lover, Imoinda, is so beautiful that the king takes her for his wife. When Oroonoko seduces her, the king enslaves them both, and they are sent to Surinam. Eventually reunited with Imoinda, Oroonoko leads a failed slave revolt and suffers a gruesome death that includes forced self-mutilation, mutilation by colonial officials, and, finally, dismemberment and quartering. The novel has been read in a variety of diverse ways, from abolitionist text to political allegory.

Behn was also an accomplished poet, known for the verse within her plays and for later poems published under the pseudonym Astrea. Most of the latter, which include erotic lyrics and odes on contemporary politics, were published in two collections: *Poems upon Several Occasions* (1684) and the translated collection *Lycidus* (1688). Her poems, which expressed love and physical passion from a female standpoint—and, according to some critics, articulated lesbian desire—were considered particularly scandalous. Behn was also an accomplished translator of French texts, known particularly for *A Discovery of New Worlds* (1688), a translation of Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle's 1686 treatise on astronomy.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Of Behn's works, *Oroonoko* has received the most critical attention. Because it is frequently seen as an important predecessor to the British novel, some scholars have addressed its genre. In a rare early twentieth-century analysis, Edwin D. Johnson (1925) found that in contrast to most prose fictions of the day, which were sentimental and heavily stylized, Behn's was based on direct observation and should be considered "the first humanitarian novel in the English language." Judy A. Hayden (2012) read the novel as a travel narrative that presents a natural history of Surinam, arguing that both the novel and Behn's translation and critique of Fontenelle's treatise refuted the assumption that science, and the language of science, represented a male endeavor.

Although *Oroonoko* was long considered an abolitionist work, recent scholars have reevaluated its political message. Richard Kroll (2004) suggested that the characters and settings are metaphors for the political turmoil of late 1680s England, addressing concepts such as liberty, freedom, and justice and delivering a warning to King James II that he must not abuse his royal prerogative. Moira Ferguson (1992; see Further Reading) discovered conflicts between Behn's feminism and her assessment of slavery. Ferguson asserted that, although *Oroonoko* articulates an abolitionist stance, the book itself supports the



Eurocentric point of view that was a central component of colonial discourse.

Scholars have also studied Behn's other works in relation to contemporary English politics. Ros Ballaster (1992) held that the moral misbehaviors of the characters in *Love-Letters between a Noble-Man and His Sister* are used to depict Whig governance as unnatural and sordid, in opposition to the order identified with the Tories. Donald R. Wehrs (1992; see Further Reading) noted that Behn drew connections in the same work between Silvia and Philander's sexual libertinism, the identification of their behaviors with the Whig party, and their lack of belief in the moral effects of language. Daniel Gustafson (2012) described *Oroonoko* and Behn's play *The Widow Ranter* (1689) as illustrations of her concern that the royalist rhetoric of divine right, heroism, and Providence, and the cultural memories of the war and its aftermath, were not effective propaganda tools to sustain the Stuart reign in the post-Civil War period.

Jenny Ludwig

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- The Forc'd Marriage; or, The Jealous Bridegroom.* Lincoln's Inn Fields, London. 20 Sept. 1670. Pub. as *The Forc'd Marriage; or, The Jealous Bridegroom, a Tragic-comedy, as It Is Acted at His Highness the Duke of York's Theatre.* London: Magnus, 1671. (Play)
- The Amorous Prince.* Lincoln's Inn Fields, London. 24 Feb. 1671. Pub. as *The Amorous Prince; or, The Curious Husband. A Comedy, as It Is Acted at His Royal Highness, the Duke of York's Theatre.* London: Dring, 1671. (Play)
- The Dutch Lover.* Dorset Garden Theatre, London. 6 Feb. 1673. Pub. as *The Dutch Lover: A Comedy, Acted at the Dukes Theatre.* London: Dring, 1673. (Play)
- Abdelazer; or, The Moor's Revenge.* Dorset Garden Theatre, London. 3 July 1676. Pub. as *Abdelazer; or, The Moor's Revenge. A Tragedy, as It Is Acted at His Royal Highness the Duke's Theatre.* London: Magnes and Bentley, 1677. (Play)
- The Town Fop; or, Sir Timothy Tawdry.* Adapt. from *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage*, by George Wilkins. Dorset Garden Theatre, London. Sept. 1676. Pub. as *The Town-Fopp; or, Sir Timothy Tawdry. A Comedy. As It Is Acted at His Royal Highness the Duke's Theatre.* London: Magnes and Bentley, 1677. (Play)
- The Debauchee.* Adapt. from *A Mad Couple Well Matched*, by Richard Brome. Dorset Garden Theatre, London. Feb. 1677. Pub. as *The Debauchee; or, The Credulous*
- Cuckold, a Comedy. Acted at His Highness the Duke of York's Theatre.* London: Amery, 1677. (Play)
- The Rover; or, The Banish't Cavaliers.* Adapt. from *Thomaso; or, The Wanderer*, by Thomas Killigrew. Dorset Garden Theatre, London. 24 Mar. 1677. Pub. as *The Rover; or, The Banish't Cavaliers. As It Is Acted at His Royal Highness the Duke's Theatre.* London: Amery, 1677. (Play)
- The Counterfeit Bridegroom; or, The Defeated Widow.* Adapt. from *No Wit, No Help like a Woman's*, by Thomas Middleton. Dorset Garden Theatre, London. Sept. 1677. Pub. as *The Counterfeit Bridegroom; or, The Defeated Widow. A Comedy, as It Is Acted at His Royal Highness the Duke's Theatre.* London: Curtiss, 1677. (Play)
- Sir Patient Fancy.* Dorset Garden Theatre, London. 17 Jan. 1678. Pub. as *Sir Patient Fancy: A Comedy. As It Is Acted at the Duke's Theatre.* London: Tonson and Tonson, 1678. (Play)
- The Feigned Courtesans; or, A Night's Intrigue.* Dorset Garden Theatre, London. Mar. 1679. Pub. as *The Feign'd Curtizans; or, A Nights Intrigue. A Comedy. As It Is Acted at the Dukes Theatre.* London: Tonson, 1679. (Play)
- The Young King; or, The Mistake.* Adapt. from *Cléopâtre*, by Gauthier de Costes de la Calprenède. Dorset Garden Theatre, London. Sept. 1679. Pub. as *The Young King; or, The Mistake. As 'Tis Acted at His Royal Highness the Dukes Theatre.* London: Brown, Benskin and Rhodes, 1683. (Play)
- The Revenge; or, A Match in Newgate.* Adapt. from *The Dutch Courtesan*, by John Marston. Dorset Garden Theatre, London. June 1680. Pub. as *The Revenge; or, A Match in Newgate. A Comedy. As It Was Acted at the Dukes Theatre.* London: Cademan, 1680. (Play)
- The Second Part of The Rover.* Dorset Garden Theatre, London. Jan. 1681. Pub. as *The Second Part of The Rover. As It Is Acted by the Servants of His Royal Highness.* London: Tonson, 1681. (Play)
- The False Count; or, A New Way to Play an Old Game.* Dorset Garden Theatre, London. Nov. 1681. Pub. as *A Farce Call'd The False Count; or, A New Way to Play an Old Game. As It Is Acted at the Duke's Theatre.* London: Tonson, 1682. (Play)
- The Roundheads; or, The Good Old Cause.* Dorset Garden Theatre, London. Dec. 1681. Pub. as *The Roundheads; or, The Good Old Cause, a Comedy as It Is Acted at His Royal Highness the Dukes Theatre.* London: Brown, Benskin and Rhodes, 1682. (Play)
- Like Father, Like Son.* Dorset Garden Theatre, London. Mar. 1682. (Play)

*The City Heiress; or, Sir Timothy Treat-All.* Dorset Garden Theatre, London. Apr. 1682. Pub. as *The City-Heiress; or, Sir Timothy Treat-All. A Comedy. As It Is Acted at His Royal Highness His Theatre.* London: Brown, Benskin and Rhodes, 1682. (Play)

\**Prologue to Romulus.* London: Thompson, 1682. (Prose)

*Poems upon Several Occasions: With a Voyage to the Island of Love.* London: Tonson and Tonson, 1684. (Poetry)

†*Prologue.* London: Tebroc, 1684. (Prose)

*Love-Letters between a Noble-Man and His Sister.* 2 vols. London: Taylor, 1684-87. (Novel)

*A Pindaric on the Death of Our Late Sovereign with an Ancient Prophecy on His Present Majesty.* London: Playford, 1685. (Poetry)

*A Pindaric Poem on the Happy Coronation of His Most Sacred Majesty James II and His Illustrious Consort Queen Mary.* London: Playford, 1685. (Poetry)

*The Lucky Chance; or, An Alderman's Bargain.* Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, London. Apr. 1686. Pub. as *The Luckey Chance; or, An Alderman's Bargain. A Comedy. As It Is Acted by Their Majesty's Servants.* London: Canning, 1687. (Play)

*La montre; or, The Lover's Watch.* Trans. Aphra Behn from *La montre*, by Balthazar de Bonnacorse. London: Canning, 1686. (Poetry and prose)

*The Emperor of the Moon.* Dorset Garden Theatre, London. Mar. 1687. Pub. as *The Emperor of the Moon: A Farce. As It Is Acted by Their Majesties Servants, at the Queens Theatre.* London: Knight and Saunders, 1687. (Play)

*Agnes de Castro; or, The Force of Generous Love. Written in French by a Lady of Quality. Made English by Mrs. Behn.* Trans. Behn from *Inês de Castro*, by Jean-Baptiste de Brilhac. London: Canning, 1688. (Novel)

*A Congratulatory Poem to Her Most Sacred Majesty on the Universal Hopes of All Loyal Persons for a Prince of Wales.* London: Canning, 1688. (Poetry)

*A Discovery of New Worlds. From the French. Made English by Mrs. A. Behn. To Which Is Prefixed a Preface, by Way of Essay on Translated Prose; Wherein the Arguments of Father Tacquet, and Others, against the System of Copernicus . . . Are Likewise Considered, and Answered.* Trans. Behn from *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*, by Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle. London: Canning, 1688. (Treatise)

*The Fair Jilt; or, The History of Prince Tarquin and Miranda.* London: Canning, 1688. (Novel)

*The History of Oracles and the Cheats of the Pagan Priests.* Trans. Behn [from the French adaptation by Fontenelle] from *De oraculis ethnicorum*, by A. van Dale. London: n.p., 1688. (Essay)

*Lycidus; or, The Lover in Fashion. Being an Account from Lycidus to Lysander, of His Voyage from the Island of Love. From the French. By the Same Author of the Voyage to the Isle of Love. Together with a Miscellany of New Poems. By Several Hands.* Trans. Behn from *Voyage de l'isle d'amour*, by Paul Tallemant, Behn, et al. London: Knight and Saunders, 1688. (Poetry)

*Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave. A True History.* London: Canning, 1688. (Novel)

*The Widow Ranter; or, The History of Bacon in Virginia.* Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, London. 20 Nov. 1689. Pub. as *The Widdow Ranter; or, The History of Bacon in Virginia. A Tragi-comedy, Acted by Their Majesties Servants.* London: Knapton, 1690. (Play)

*The History of the Nun; or, The Fair Vow-Breaker.* London: Baskerville, 1689. (Novel)

*The Lucky Mistake: A New Novel.* London: Bentley, 1689. (Novel)

*A Pindaric Poem to the Reverend Dr. Burnet.* London: Bentley, 1689. (Poetry)

*The Younger Brother; or, The Amorous Jilt.* Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, London. Feb. 1696. Pub. as *The Younger Brother; or, The Amorous Jilt. A Comedy, Acted at the Theatre Royal, by His Majesty's Servants.* London: Harris, 1696. (Play)

*The Histories and Novels of the Late Ingenious Mrs. Behn: In One Volume. . . together with the Life and Memoirs of Mrs. Behn.* London: Briscoe, 1696. (Biography, memoirs, novels, and plays)

*The Lady's Looking-Glass, to Dress Herself By; or, The Whole Art of Charming.* London: Briscoe, 1697. (Poetry and prose)

‡*Histories, Novels, and Translations, Written by the Most Ingenious Mrs. Behn; the Second Volume.* London: S. B., 1700. (Novels and prose)

*The Plays, Histories, and Novels of the Ingenious Mrs. Aphra Behn.* Ed. John Pearson. 6 vols. London: Pearson, 1871. (Novels, plays, and prose)

*The Works of Aphra Behn.* Ed. Montague Summers. 6 vols. London: Heinemann, 1915. (Novels, plays, poetry, and prose)

*Selected Writings of the Ingenious Mrs. Aphra Behn.* Ed. Robert Phelps. New York: Grove, 1950. (Novels, plays, poetry, and prose)

*The Rover.* Ed. Frederick M. Link. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1967. (Play)

*The Uncollected Verse of Aphra Behn.* Ed. Germaine Greer. Essex: Stump Cross, 1989. (Poetry)

*The Works of Aphra Behn.* Ed. Janet Todd. 7 vols. London: Pickering and Chatto, 1993-96. (Novels, plays, poetry, prose, and short stories)

*Oroonoko, and Other Writings.* Ed. Paul Salzman. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. (Novels)

*The Poems of Aphra Behn: A Selection.* Ed. Todd. New York: New York UP, 1994. (Poetry)

*Oroonoko: An Authoritative Text, Historical Backgrounds, Criticism.* Ed. Joanna Lipking. New York: Norton, 1997. (Novel)

\*This work is a prolog to the anonymous 1682 play *Romulus and Hersilia; or, The Sabine War*.

†This work is a prolog to John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester's 1685 adaptation of *Valentinian*, by John Fletcher.

‡This work includes *The Unfortunate Bride*, *The Wandering Beauty*, *The Dumb Virgin*, and *The Unhappy Mistake*.

## CRITICISM

Edwin D. Johnson (essay date 1925)

SOURCE: Johnson, Edwin D. "Aphra Behn's 'Oroonoko.'" *Journal of Negro History* 10.3 (1925): 334-42. Print.

[In the following essay, Johnson provides an analytic summary of Behn's novel *Oroonoko*, identifying it as a groundbreaking work of realist fiction. He describes the novel as nearly autobiographical—in contrast to the heavily fictionalized historical romances popular at the time—and calls it "the first humanitarian novel in the English language."]

Mrs. Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave*, represents a distinct genre in the evolution of the English novel. Up to the appearance of *Oroonoko* heavy historical romances were enjoying a great vogue. The characters in these productions were mainly allegorical and the setting was usually in some distinctly imaginative country. *Oroonoko*, however, has local color, and frequent touches of realism; the hero dominates the whole story and has a

marked personality. These qualities in the English novel were almost unknown until Mrs. Behn's novel appeared.

Aphra Behn was born in Canterbury in Kent in the year 1640. Her father, whose name was Johnson, through relationship with Lord Willoughby received an appointment as Governor of Surinam. This was an English possession in the northeast portion of South America, and is known today as Dutch Guiana. Johnson died at sea in a hurricane, but the rest of the family, which included the daughter, proceeded to the new country; and it was in Surinam on a nearby plantation that Mrs. Behn met Oroonoko, a handsome slave who she says had a "kindly air." She learned from his own lips of the life he had lived in Africa, and saw with her own eyes the horrors of the hateful slave system to which he was subjected. Over the possession of Surinam the English and Dutch were often at war. After the Dutch attack in 1667 and the subsequent surrender of Surinam by the English Lieutenant-Governor in 1668, it is probable that Mrs. Behn left immediately for England, Surinam being no longer under British influence.

When she returned to England the young woman attracted the attention of Charles II. She was sent by him as a spy to Antwerp to gain information concerning the movements of the Dutch. Although she was not successful in this, she gained great favor at the Court. Being close to the monarch, she related her story of Oroonoko to him. He was deeply impressed with the fate of "this great man," and requested the narrator to put her charming as well as touching story into the form of a novel.

In *Oroonoko*, which appeared in novel form in 1688, Mrs. Behn did pioneer service, actually blazing the trail for the eighteenth century realistic novelists, and the humanitarian writers that followed some years later. Here was a woman, who had the courage, at a time when the historical romances were enjoying a great vogue, to write a novel whose characters were real and whose setting was not in an imaginative country, but a real one. About this time on the Continent the great French masters were leading a revolt against the historical romances. Charles Sorel's *Le Berger Extravagant*, Moliere's *Le Précieuses Ridicules*, and Boileau's *Lucian Dialogue* all contributed to the death of the romantic element in the novel as practiced by the litterateurs of that day.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Behn possibly did not wish to be considered the river-head of English realism, or to be considered a revolter against the spirit of the novel of her day. Her life proves quite the contrary. She, like a great many of her contemporaries, was a time-server, and fell quite harmoniously in with the spirit of the age. But whether knowingly or unknowingly, she produced a work in which she made frequent use of realistic touches which gave her an important place in the development of the English novel.

Mrs. Behn in an attempt to be realistic sometimes startles one in her geographical descriptions. She writes of Surinam:

'Tis a continent, whose vast Extent was never yet known,  
and may contain more noble Earth than all the Universe  
besides; for, they say, it reaches from East to West one way  
as far as China, and another to Peru.<sup>2</sup>

Local color in the novel at that time was almost an unknown attribute. *Oroonoko* reflects life in the tropics. The descriptions are almost photographic.

'Tis there eternal Spring, always the very months of April,  
May, and June. The trees appearing all like nosegays,  
adorn'd with flowers; some are all white, some purple,  
some scarlet, some blue, some yellow.<sup>3</sup>

She concludes:

Not all the Gardens of boasted Italy can produce a Shade  
to out vie this which Nature has join'd with art to render so  
exceeding fine.<sup>4</sup>

Mrs. Behn speaks frequently of certain animals that infested Surinam, such as the torpedo or numb eel, tigers, armadillos, cusharees, marmosets, some peculiar flies and the buffaloes. That these animals actually lived there is affirmed by Wallace in a book published in 1667 entitled *An Impartial Description of Surinam*. Mrs. Behn, not being entirely free from the influence of the French heroic romances, added a dash of the fantastic in describing these animals. She writes in describing the tiger, which Oroonoko delights to hunt:

We wondered at his daring, and the Bigness of the Beast,  
which was about the Height of an Heifer.<sup>5</sup>

Of the armadillo she says:

A little Beast call'd an Armadillo a Thing which I can  
liken to nothing so well as a Rhinoceros.<sup>6</sup>

Mrs. Behn's making use of the local color in her visit to Surinam which gave her novel an indisputable place in English realism undoubtedly gave to Defoe, Richardson and the other eighteenth century realists the great vogue that their works enjoyed. *Oroonoko* appeared thirty-one years before Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and fifty-two years before Richardson's *Pamela*. The last two works named are considered as a warning that a flood of realism was about to descend upon a waiting world. Although Mrs. Behn is not accurate in some of her descriptions, as Professor Bernbaun has noted, yet, as Professor Canby says, "I can only believe after many readings, she wished to set forth with a reasonable degree of truth."

The novel is intensely dramatic. The element of suspense is well handled. Nothing had been done so admirably in plot developing as this until Fielding wrote *Joseph Andrews*. Cæsar, a black man, the hero in Mrs. Behn's *Oroonoko*, was the first distinctly drawn character in English fiction.<sup>7</sup>

*Oroonoko* has all the tone of being a true biography of this noble slave. On the title page Mrs. Behn writes:

I do not pretend in giving you the History of this Royal Slave, to entertain my Readers with the Adventures of a feign'd Hero, whose Life and Fortunes Fancy may manage at the Poet's pleasure; nor in relating the Truth, design to adorn it with 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 of a great part of what you will find here set down.<sup>8</sup>

As to Oroonoko's life in Africa Mrs. Behn says:

and what I could not witness of I received it from the mouth of the Chief Actor in this History, the Hero himself.<sup>9</sup>

Oroonoko, a grandson of the old king of Coramantien, was made general of his grandfather's army at the age of seventeen. As to how our lost hero looked I can not do better than to quote Mrs. Behn's exact words:

He was pretty tall, but of a Shape the most exact that can be fancy'd: The most famous Statuary could not form the Figure of a Man more admirably turn'd from Head to Foot. His face was not of that brown rusty Black which most of that Nation are, but a perfect Ebony, or polished Jet.<sup>10</sup>

She was no less enthusiastic of his mental qualities:

His discourse was admirable upon almost any subject; and whoever had heard him speak, would have been convinced of their Errors, that all fine Wit is confined to the white men, especially to those of Christendom.<sup>11</sup>

The late general whom Oroonoko succeeded had a beautiful daughter, "a black Venus," with whom Oroonoko became passionately in love. He wooed and married the beautiful Imoinda. Oroonoko's grandfather, hearing of this famed beauty, sent the "Veil" for her, which was a royal command that the king desired her as a wife, from which desire she could not shrink. She was placed in the king's "otan." Imoinda continued to love Oroonoko. The king suspected Imoinda's love for Oroonoko, and sent her lover back to the field. Before Oroonoko made his departure for the campaign against the enemy, he paid his last secret visit to Imoinda in the "otan." Here he was captured by the king's spies.

Whoever, ye are that the boldness to approach this apartment thus rudely; know, that I, Prince Oroonoko, will revenge it with the certain death of him that first enters: Therefore stand back, and know, this Place is sacred to Love and Me this Night; Tomorrow 'tis the king's.<sup>12</sup>

This outrage of the "Veil" was reported to the king. After a fierce denunciation of Imoinda, he sold her into slavery. Oroonoko was exhorted to take the field against an enemy of his grandfather's kingdom. He returned to the court victorious, and feted "not only like a young victor but like a belov'd Deity."