

OROONOKO

APHRA BEHN



EDITED BY JOANNA LIPKING

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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Aphra Behn
OROONOKO



AN AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS
CRITICISM

Edited by
JOANNA LIPKING
NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

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Preface

We know little about the professional woman writer who signed herself "A. Behn," but we know that late in life she was openly ambitious, wanting "Fame" for her plays, "Immortality" for her poems. A few of her plays became favorites in repertory, her poems were praised by later poets, and her fiction was steadily republished through the mid-eighteenth century. But it was *Oroonoko*, the longest of her short tales, that established what she called "the Reputation of my Pen." With her "Royal Slave," a black African prince ensnared in the slave traffic to the Americas, Behn found a subject of such scope and intensity that it kept a niche in the literary histories, even when her other writings were judged indecent and out of date. *Oroonoko* seemed to stand for what was new: the origins of the novel, the growth of empire, the emergence of women writers, interest in non-European "others," the cultivation of sensibility, enlightened ideals of personal freedom. Now this small classic seems to fascinate everyone. But what is it?

There is no settled answer. Critics have differed about its form, its truth, and its sympathies. Placed among traditional genres and currents of thought, *Oroonoko* has seemed an original use of heroic romance and play conventions and the first realistic novel, thirty years before Defoe; like a life of a noble Roman or the life reconnected to nature later idealized by Rousseau; in its politics insistently Royalist or revealing radical undercurrents; a work that brings to light or glosses over the wrongs of the slave trade. Behn's own claim that her tale was a "True History" set off a running dispute among twentieth-century readers for whom history was one thing, fiction another. To some, *Oroonoko* was transparently a tall story, a piece of mythmaking, or perhaps a triumph of fictional imagination and technique; meanwhile the lure of the tale sent scholars from many countries sleuthing through long-forgotten colonial records, gathering evidence that Behn probably visited Surinam and that much of her background detail was accurate or at least plausible, resembling other descriptions of the West Indies. But history, in a more current view, must be understood as an official narrative by privileged voices. New waves of interest in feminist revaluation of women's writing, in gender and race as categories of analysis, and in converging populations of the Atlantic basin and colonialist practices and discourses have led critics to explore another

question: how Behn's story is complicit with and resists the weight of old oppressions.

Like some exotic specimen that is yet to be cataloged, *Oroonoko* attracts and challenges. Critics in this volume see blended forms and internal tensions. Perhaps the bold recombining and literalizing of inherited forms for immediate human interest was especially congenial to women and other newcomers to literature. But what the continuing disagreements suggest, above all, is the usefulness of placing Behn's tale among related documents of its time, without regard for their status as literature, their authenticity as history, or their measure of moral clarity. Like *Oroonoko* in their setting and subject and often their anecdotal power, such documents provide a context for the tale—if not a standard account of its origins and influence, at least a fuller sense of its own place and moment. Above all, they invite readers to examine its treatment of slavery and of racial or cultural “others” in relation to events and attitudes in the distant colonial world it represents and in the world of metropolitan Europe where it was read.

Whatever its basis in experience, *Oroonoko* takes place in a world “out there” that was mapped, navigated, interpreted, and settled. Unlike Shakespeare's *Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe*, or *Gulliver's Travels*, it portrays other peoples who had their own histories, though forever distorted, written by the literate Europeans. As peoples from three continents meet in scenes of curiosity and friendship, Behn explains how they could communicate and gives to each complex and changing views of the others. In her most arresting innovation, she introduces West African slaves during the ill-documented first stages of the slave trade. Behind lay the expansiveness of the sixteenth-century discovery voyages; ahead, the familiar images of planter luxury and slave subjugation, the polarizing of whites and blacks, and the heritage of racialist and sentimental cliché that came with the full development of the slave system. The comparatively sparse records are now the subject of exacting study, so present-day readers need not take their understanding of early slavery from the tale itself or from popular belief. Here an introductory survey—provisional, since the work of reconstruction continues—and selected firsthand reports open a window on scenes that, like *Oroonoko* itself, can often be surprising.

To weigh Behn's debts to the broader range of travel literature would merely encumber a short text with annotations. The available reports, those of America especially, were full of received ideas, common images, and reiterated phrases. The constant springtime with ever-blooming trees was a truism, the wonder that struck observers at the new tropical landscapes apparently unending. Even the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* account of Guiana (encompassing Surinam) emphasizes the superabundance of its “perpetual” vegetation, “inexhaustible”

fine timbers, and "indescribable" birds of plumage. By the time Behn wrote, such details as the Indian priests, or *Peeies*, had been mentioned in many accounts, while selected images, including armadillos and women in feather crowns, had become emblematic of the New World and were drawn in vacant spaces on maps. Native Indian customs, if admittedly strange or cruel, might be seen to reflect an uncomplicated manly ethic, in contrast to the degraded morals and artificial tastes—sometimes termed the "effeminacy"—of Christian Europe. When Montaigne identified the cannibals' two guiding precepts as "Valour towards their enemies and love towards their wives," those could easily be seen as a rude version of traditional noble ideals, the "Fierce warres and faithfull loves" that Spenser invoked in *The Faerie Queene*. Without such details and this idealizing vein, Behn's readers might have felt that she was not presenting a bona fide America.

Her Africa, if romanticized, broadly fits its seventeenth-century profile as a place of wealthy trader kings. No doubt the scene making can seem as fanciful as in a creaky Hollywood epic. When Behn's king acts like an autocrat in an "Oriental" tale, he has for backdrop not just the usual African furnishings of canopy and carpets but a marble bath, and when her hero turns from battle like a latter-day Achilles, he has a pavilion and a couch. But it is not a fancy that in only two years' trading around 1660, English ships carried out to the main station at Corman-tine more than thirty-five hundred rugs and about five hundred carpets, among other goods. Not surprisingly, ruling-class Africans might be thought of as partners, while the uprooted, mixed lot of colonists, pursuing fortunes in ill-governed new places, were often stereotyped, noted in the first place for their consumption of drink. Remarks on the slaves are casual and inconsistent, but the first travel accounts in English from the 1650s and 1660s—Richard Ligon's of Barbados, George Warren's of Surinam, John Davies's digest on the Antilles—offer a few repeated notions and catchphrases: that slaves were treated "like dogs" or worse; constituted the colonists' wealth; and showed a striking readiness to die, partly in the belief that they would return to their "own country."

The coincidence among reports is the result not only of shared opinions and habitual ways of seeing but of industrious copying. Title pages do not disclose that works are rough translations, or compilations by nontravelers made up of every sort of material, or recyclings of colorful but long-outdated reports (such as Jean de Léry's on Brazil in 1586 and Pieter De Marees's on West Africa in 1602). Works might be all of those. It is best to think of the writers as compiling a joint encyclopedia, with a generous admixture of folklore and little ever discarded. Even the most independent on-the-scene reporters, those culled for this edition, regularly consulted earlier books, filled out their accounts on matters they did not know, and were appropriated in their turn. Behn does

not seem to rely on any particular sources, and she includes practical information that does not seem readily available in Europe, but if she made no use of texts, she would have been very nearly alone.

As a prospect of America, *Oroonoko* resembles Frans Post's landscape on the cover of this volume, painted after his return to Europe. He depicts an identifiable site (a village near Recife in northeast Brazil), arranges typical landscape features and human figures in a New World genre painting (his prints were used to represent Surinam as well), and plainly looks back to established European landscape styles. But in contrast to all of the men who saw and represented the colonies, the woman storyteller introduces new foreground figures, a hero and heroine who are slaves of rank. Although some readers note similar sounds in African languages, their names do not seem recognizably African. It has been suggested that Oroonoko was named after the French romance hero Oroondates in La Calprenède's *Cassandre*, a prince from the rough borderland of Scythia who excels among the cultivated Persians, or, with curious naïveté, for the South American river Orinoco, explored by Sir Walter Raleigh, a few hundred miles north of Surinam. Perhaps an echo of the Virginia colony names—Roanoke, Croonoke, Choanoke—helped to make the name sound suitably foreign to a Europe that blurred ethnographic distinctions. Imoinda's name and the family rivalry she inspires recall Dryden's Indamora, the captive Asian princess in his rhymed heroic play *Aureng-Zebe*. But however they and their names were derived, her noble pair escape the ordinary lot of slaves, whose origins and identities were lost during their transport and breaking in, and are seen with sustained and intimate sympathy. It was they—not the colonists or the detailed colonial background—who caught the imagination of Europe.

They and other black Africans described as noble appeared not only in fiction but in the theater, poems, periodical essays, and assorted other forms. Similar figures are found at the center of what might be called epiphenomena, when a current news item busied many pens with interpretations and elaborations. It was through such figures that Europe began to think or at least to feel its way through the issues of slavery. The accounts are a medley. If they no longer convey much of the colonial scene that Behn called her "other World," they open to view a lively cosmopolitan world that was drawn, much like ours, to stirring or sensational action, glamor, strangeness, sentiment, personal stories and public quarrels. In his essay exploring the "problematical territory" of *Oroonoko*, Robert L. Chibka cites a description of fiction as leaving the reader poised on a knife edge between belief and disbelief. Here we might sometimes think of a diaphanous screen (or perhaps a small fog) with African figures passing from one side to the other, imagined characters taken for historical persons, living persons turned into characters, each reinforcing views of the other. As in *Oroonoko* itself, history

and fiction may mingle, their characters sometimes hobnobbing, amid many reminders that the human appetite for striking events may shape what is seen and that a single word meant novel, novelty, and news.

A few of Behn's contemporaries, perhaps playing along with a friendship too novel to disbelieve, claimed that she had often spoken warmly about Oroonoko. Even the faults and difficulties of the 1688 text, as well as its conversational style, can recreate the sense of a tale-teller's circle, the heavy punctuation marking her speech pauses, the ambiguous pronouns, shifting tenses, and unshapely sentences conveying her eager forward motion, her concentration on the immediacy of what she has to tell. For unknown reasons, *Oroonoko* was also printed in haste, set by two compositors working independently, probably in two different print shops. Both left sentences whose syntax is beyond correction, and the second, during a passage on the marvels of America, appears to have been falling asleep. George Guffey in 1975 suggested that Behn's "Royal Slave" was hurried into print to point up the imminent peril facing James II, his wife, and his new heir, while others cite evidence of Behn's flagging health and need for money. The result, in any case, is that during Oroonoko's dinner conversation with Trefry, the text breaks, a signature is dropped, and the second printer takes up the task using different typographic styles and different, sometimes eccentric habits of spelling. There is no sign that once she supplied the manuscript, Behn had any further role. To provide a readable classroom text, spellings and punctuation that are distracting or confusing have been emended, in most cases following the small corrections (but not the guesswork) of the second and third editions. Emendations are listed in the "Textual Notes," with cruxes marked in the footnotes, so that scholars may have a dependable original text, thus far unavailable in a popular or single-volume edition. With the permission of their authors, quotations within the critical essays have been made consistent with the present Norton text. There has been no attempt to preserve the exact form of the accompanying contextual materials, but they are conservatively modernized (notably by the modernizing of unfamiliar obsolete spellings and misleading punctuation, normalizing of place names, expansion of contractions, removal of some italics and capitalizing not meant for emphasis, and, of course, replacement of old lettering). The spelling in Henry Whistler's journal has required full modernization. Translations of Du Tertre's history, Barbot's 1679 journal, *L'Année Littéraire*, and brief quoted travelers' remarks are mine, with the kind assistance of Tilde Sankovitch.

In attempting to reconstruct Behn's range of reference and conditions on three continents, I have asked help wherever I could, but I have learned in especially practical ways from Edna G. Bay, Paul Breslin, Helen Deutsch, Bernadette Fort, Lawrence Lipking (*maestro di color*

che sanno), Russell Maylone of Northwestern Special Collections, Martin Mueller, Barbara Newman, James P. Oakes, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Mary Ann O'Donnell, Stephen Orgel, Hans Panofsky, Rebecca Parker, Orlando Patterson, Johnny Payne, Ruth Perry, William Roberts, Natalie Schmitt, Janet Todd, James G. Turner, M. V. Wakefield-Richmond, Ivor Wilks, David W. Wills, and Garry Wills. It was my good fortune to have at hand the distinguished collection and informed staff of the Herskovits Africana Collection of the Northwestern University Library, and during 1993–94, the shared learning of participants in the Seminars on Race and Gender and on the African Diaspora at the National Humanities Center. Alert help at critical moments by staff members of the Northwestern Library Interlibrary Loan Department and the Newberry Library Photoduplication Department, Michael T. Dumas of the Harvard Theatre Collection, Christopher Fletcher of the British Library Department of Manuscripts, and Northwestern Humanities Bibliographer Jeffrey B. Garrett has amounted to scholarly collaboration. My colleague Douglas Cole was the photographer of Northwestern Library materials.

I am deeply indebted to the six critics in this volume for their willingness and aid in the compression of their arguments to the constraints of a short volume. At Norton, Carol Bemis gave unfailingly patient support through difficulties and delays that could plausibly explain a recourse to two print shops. Over the years, English Department students Heidi Sandige, Elissa Preheim, Becky St. John, and especially Celeste DiNucci have handled early texts with notable care. My current students, with the explanation that they are “the multicultural generation,” had such pointed and interesting questions about the art and polemic of *Oroonoko* that I gladly leave this edition to their generation.

July 18, 1996

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The Text of
OROONOKO
or, The Royal Slave: A True History



OROONOKO:

OR, THE

Royal Slave.

A TRUE

HISTORY.

By Mrs. *A. BEHN.*

LONDON,

Printed for *Will. Canning*, at his Shop in
the *Temple-Cloysters.* 1688.