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APHRA BEHN
Oroonoko;
or, The Royal Slave

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An engraving of Aphra Behn from the frontispiece edition of her *Histories and Novels*, published in 1696, in London. Published eight years after her death, it is the earliest surviving image of the author. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Introduction: Cultural and Historical Background

THE WORLD HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF OROONOKO

Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave is the first literary work in English to grasp the global interactions of the modern world. Narrating her hero's journey from West Africa to the Caribbean and his fatal encounter with British colonists, Aphra Behn traces the outlines of a new, interlocking, transcontinental order. The three corners of this Atlantic triangle are called "worlds" in *Oroonoko*: "our world," England, the polite but highly artificial and commercial home of Aphra Behn and her readers, where martial heroes are mainly stage phenomena; Africa, where royal heroes make perpetual war, winning vast numbers of slaves in battle; and Suriname, the roomy but "obscure" American "New World," where friendly natives welcome European colonists and everything is naturally plentiful, except for the one commodity that seems discouraged by such abundance — willing labor.

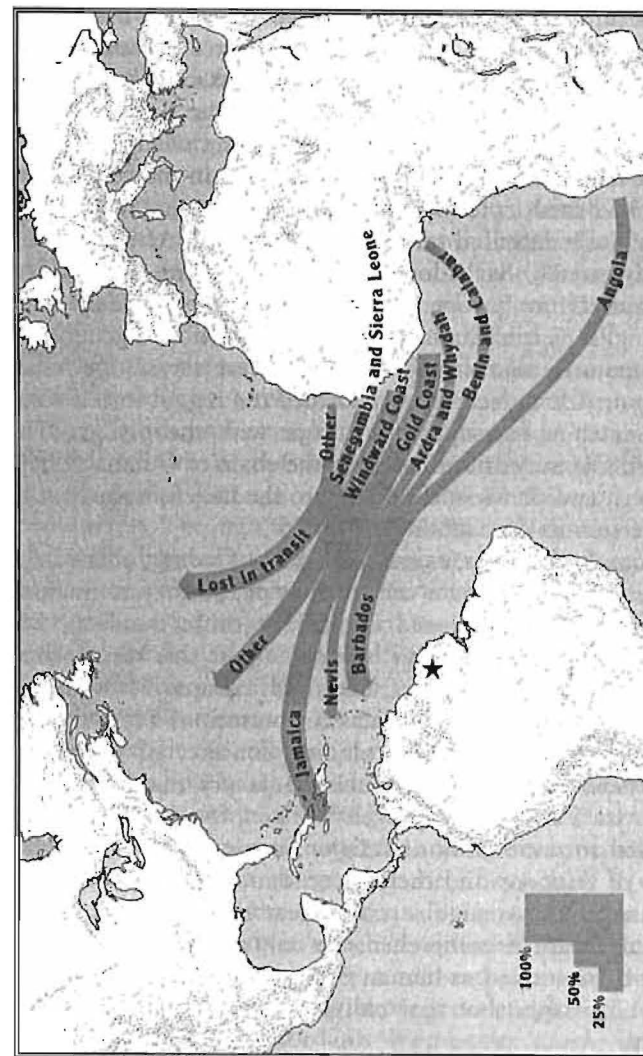
Although Behn develops the distinctness of these places — the seeming separateness and completeness of each that the word *world* designates — the tale also stresses their mutual interpenetration. Europeans move into Africa and are found even at the court of Oroonoko's grandfather; Africans and Europeans are shipped to America, where they remake its landscape; and American goods are on display in London, where the conquest of Indians becomes a theatrical spectacle.

Each place has a different form of wealth: England's wealth is commercial and technological, Africa's riches are mainly in people, and America's in land and natural resources. The imagined surpluses of each continent are thought to supply the wants of another in an interlocking triangle. In sum, *Oroonoko* depicts and, indeed, participates in the differentiation of these "worlds" as components of an unprecedented integral structure.

That structure, which has come to be called "the triangular trade," was an economic, political, and cultural novelty to Behn's readers in the late seventeenth century; English participation in the trade was only about thirty years old when *Oroonoko* was published in 1688. To be sure, large parts of the Americas had long been colonized, and Europeans had dealt in African slaves for centuries, but what distinguished the triangular trade was the forced transportation of a laboring population from one continent (Africa) to another (America) to produce a commodity consumed on a third (Europe). The Spanish in Cuba and the Portuguese in Brazil were the first to use this system; the British came later to the practice but joined in readily and vigorously, demonstrating no hesitation. Their exploitation of African slave labor in the Caribbean massively increased the number of people dislocated, the wealth obtained, the degree of coordination achieved, and the extent of English psychological and economic investment in the institution of colonial slavery.¹

These developments rapidly followed the discovery in the mid-1640s that sugar cane could be just as successfully grown and processed in the West Indies as in Brazil. Before this realization, English Caribbean colonists were a somewhat hapless lot of largely unsuccessful tobacco and cotton farmers, assisted by "servants" in various, and not very well discriminated, states of unfreedom: indentured laborers and political prisoners from Ireland, Scotland, and England, some of whom were virtual slaves because they were serving life sentences; and black slaves, human property, purchased or kidnapped in Africa. When the colonists converted to sugar cane, their operations quickly outgrew their labor supply: to replenish it quickly, they bought more and more slaves in Africa. Before the sugar revolution, African slaves were a small proportion of the West Indian labor force. By the early

¹ Information on the history of slavery in the British Caribbean comes from the following sources: Aykroyd; Bean; Beckles and Shepherd; Beer; Blackburn, Making; Bridenbaugh and Bridenbaugh; Curtin, Atlantic; Davis; Dunn; Thomas; Sheridan; Watson; E. Williams; Williamson; and Wyndham. Information on the triangular trade comes from many of these same sources, as well as from Inikori, and Inikori and Engerman.



This map shows the proportions of slaves shipped from the various parts of West Africa by the British Royal African Company between 1673 and 1689, as well as their destinations. The majority were from the Gulf of Guinea, many from the Gold Coast, the location of Oroonoko's "Coramantien," and almost all were destined for the West Indian sugar islands. By 1673, England had lost its colony in Suriname, which was the setting for *Oroonoko*. Suriname is southeast of Barbados, on the northern coast of South America; on this map, its location has been marked with a star. Copyright © 1969 The University of Wisconsin Press. Reproduced with permission.

1660s (the time of the events depicted in *Oroonoko*), the African population of the largest sugar-producing island, Barbados, was roughly equal to the entire white population (22,000 whites to 20,000 blacks), and by 1690 (around the time of *Oroonoko*'s publication), blacks outnumbered whites by a ratio of approximately three to one: almost 50,000 people of African origin or their descendants and some 18,000 people categorized as "white."² The rapidity of the English Caribbean's conversion to slavery is all the more striking when compared with the continuing marginality of that institution in the continental North American British colonies; in Virginia as late as 1689, there were 10,401 white indentured servants, but only 629 African slaves, whereas already in 1680 Barbados had 38,782 slaves and only 2,317 indentured servants from Europe.³ Slavery became the dominant institution of the English Caribbean in less than a generation; a generation later, the vast majority of the region's people were slaves of African origin or descent. A few decades transformed the region into a ruthlessly efficient machine for supplying Europe with cheap sugar. The English founded a colony at Suriname on the coast of Guiana (where *Oroonoko* is set), and then lost the colony to the Dutch in the heat of this swift conversion to slave labor.

One can quote the statistics, examine the bills of lading for the slave ships, compute the tons of sugar sent to Europe, and try to imagine the misery, inhumanity, and greed implied by those numbers. But the experiences of the people who brought about this transformation and suffered through it remain frustratingly opaque. How did the Africans endure their enslavement and transportation? How did the English, both at home and in the colonies, conceive of what they were doing? When and how did they racialize slavery, that is, attach it exclusively to Africans and their progeny? When, for that matter, did race, as opposed to nationality or religion, come to be seen as the salient feature of Africans and their descendants in the Caribbean? Many historians of the triangular trade treat the colonists as economic automata, creatures comprehensible only as profit maximizers. But if we view them instead as human beings from a specific culture, we can ask which aspects of that culture shaped British-American colonial slavery.

² Estimates of the number of slaves in Barbados vary. These conservative figures are from Dunn 320. For a much higher estimate, see Thomas 187. For all references to sources, see the Works Cited list beginning on p. 464.

³ See Bean and Thomas 386. Totals for Barbados are derived from tables in Dunn 96, 107.

Oroonoko is one of the very few seventeenth-century books that can help us answer these questions. As a heroic tragedy, Aphra Behn's tale exaggerates precisely those emotional experiences that were often suppressed or flattened in the historical descriptions, debates, and documentary records of the period. Instead of rationalizing and normalizing the English trans-Atlantic enterprise, *Oroonoko* churns up its fears and hopes, its sensations of outrage and ambition, confusion and power. The tragedy's formal literary qualities thus create its historical value, for they force to the surface the conflict and turmoil that other records buried. Moreover, since *Oroonoko*'s story was revived in different versions throughout the century that followed its original publication (see pp. 103–40), eventually becoming part of the propaganda of the anti-slave trade movement, its reception both registered changes in English attitudes toward slavery and helped to create them.

If *Oroonoko* is much less directly informative about the other cultures affected by the triangular trade, if its main value is in demonstrating British understandings of African and Caribbean peoples, a skeptical reading of the work can nevertheless indicate the clashes between British patterns of perception and those of the people they encountered. Through the contradictions and elisions of this text, we can catch glimpses of what the enslavers couldn't see. For example, Behn wishes to represent the slave trade as a potentially honorable enterprise carried on with African trading partners, just as she wishes to depict the Indians⁴ as naturally generous and welcoming, but the violent coerciveness of the Europeans repeatedly comes to the fore, shattering the pretenses to amicable commerce. The tale, in short, reveals more than the teller can consciously acknowledge.

To explore both what *Oroonoko* reveals and what it conceals about its historical situation, the five chapters in Part Two of this volume include three groups of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century texts, each of which looks at the triangular trade from one of its three corners: England, Africa, and the Caribbean. This organization is designed to stress the local contexts in which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century people conceived of the slave trade and of racial difference. It is designed to challenge the conviction, prevalent since the publication in 1968 of Winthrop D. Jordan's *White over Black*, that the British began their careers as slave traders and slave masters with a stable and securely held ideological justification for slavery built on their belief in

⁴ We are following Behn's use of "Indians" to designate all indigenous American peoples.

the genetic inferiority of African people.⁵ Looking at the issues as perceived from each corner of the triangle demonstrates that there was no single monolithic “British” racial ideology in this period; it shows instead the interplay between beliefs and what we might call “the facts on the ground” in the three locations. By giving separate attention to the three angles over an extended period of time, we can see how ideas about racial difference, for example, adjusted to varying situations and were reshaped by changing desires and political and economic pressures.

The texts pertaining to each location have separate introductions, but there are some general patterns and strange contradictions that we should notice at the outset. First, at the beginning of the seventeenth century the English had no such category as slave in their legal, social, or political traditions. In this they differed from the Spanish — one of their competitors in the West Indies — who had slavery in their own European country and a legal system to justify and regulate it. Some historians have suggested that the English lack of experience with the institution made them unusually harsh slave owners who were very likely to racialize the condition. But the English did not commence with the belief that Africans, and Africans alone, were somehow “naturally” enslavable. There were white slaves in seventeenth-century Barbados (see *Petitions Protesting Slavery*, pp. 408–14), and indentured servants were often bought and sold as if they were exchangeable chattel whose bondage had a limited term (see Ligon, pp. 355–65). Indeed, the narrator of *Oroonoko* calls such servants “slaves for four years” (p. 347). Reports suggest that Indians were also held in slavery; even Behn, who accentuates their freedom at the outset, later refers to Indian servants as slaves.

The English in the Caribbean gradually racialized slavery as they sorted out its differences from other forms of servitude. Over the course of the second half of the seventeenth century, the practice of sending English, Scots, and Irish political prisoners to the West Indies as involuntary laborers was discontinued, and a body of police laws grew up in the Caribbean colonies, specifically and severely limiting the rights and freedoms of Africans and their descendants.⁶ Only the

⁵ Jordan joined an ongoing debate about whether racism grew out of slavery, or slavery out of racism, which continues in the historical literature. For a summary of the debate, see Allen 1–24.

⁶ Information on Caribbean slave laws comes from Watson and Dunn.

most minimal justifications prefaced these laws; there was no organized or official body of thought about why Africans could be held and traded as property but other people could not. Indeed, the question of just what kind of property a slave was went unsettled. The police laws, moreover, were local laws, *lex loci*, which English common law recognized as valid only in the slave colonies. What, then, was the status of an African slave when his master brought him to England? Legal opinions differed widely on this issue (see Ligon and Godwyn, pp. 355–65, and *Legal Decisions Concerning Slavery in England*, p. 414–23).

Second, the fact that the colonists were making up racialized slavery as they went along in the seventeenth century and that it was a local institution at the heart of an intercontinental enterprise led to marked discrepancies in the way Africans were perceived in the different “worlds” of the trade. For a modern reader of the documents assembled here, perhaps the most striking incongruity is the double vision required of slave traders themselves. The men who supplied the West Indian plantations, especially those who worked directly for the Royal African Company (a trading monopoly established by Charles II in 1672), needed to be on very good terms with their African trading partners in order to have any access to the trade at all.⁷ They were competing against several other European national monopolies, as well as numerous interlopers, and their success often depended on their personal relations with African rulers. They were closely involved in the politics of the “kingdoms” on the Ivory, Gold, and Slave Coasts, jockeying for monopolies and making alliances with some nations and leaders against others (see *Correspondence of Slave Traders in the Royal African Company*, pp. 230–34, and Phillips, pp. 234–44). For all of these reasons, the trade in Africa forced Englishmen to observe status and national differences between Africans, pay court to rulers, display marks of respect for the great men of the region, their wives, families, and attendants, and maintain a reputation for trustworthiness. Englishmen who by word or deed indiscriminately lumped all Africans together as barbarians, showed signs of racial contempt, or behaved treacherously could cause considerable damage to English interests in the region (see *The Royal African*, pp. 278–302). Hence, even in the works of British slave traders, there is a palpable tension

⁷ Information on European traders in Africa comes from Davies; Hewett; Law, *Slave*; Lovejoy; and Makepeace.

between regarding Africans as just so many potential slaves and responding appropriately to their ethnic and status differences.

But these same Englishmen, once arrived in the West Indies, were equally obliged to regard Africans as indistinguishable slaves. Once an African had been acquired by a trader, whether "legitimately" or not, and sold to a planter in the West Indies, he was simply a slave with no rights whatsoever. Even the Royal African Company might have difficulty retrieving a person of quality tricked into slavery (see *The Royal African*, pp. 278–302). He would have to be manumitted, that is, legally emancipated, in the colony to become a freeman once again, and the racial nature of British West Indian law made that process extremely difficult. In short, the slave trade required its English agents to recognize African status and national differences when trading in Guinea and then to ignore those differences and adopt strictly racial distinctions when in the Caribbean.

Oroonoko registers this disorienting contrast in the stark paradox of its subtitle: *The Royal Slave*. The hero's tragic insistence that his change of place and outward circumstances cannot touch his inner essence — that he remains royal — is certainly credited by the narrator and all of the discerning colonists. Nevertheless, his English friends seem unable to restore him to his kingdom, and legally, despite the respect often shown him, his kingship has been eclipsed by his color. Ironically, his nobility, which had made him the companion and partner of the English in Africa, is the very thing that makes him vulnerable to betrayal and enslavement. The tale requires the reader to feel the impact of the discrepancy between the code of rank that operated in Africa and the code of race that ruled in the West Indies. But the tale reveals considerable distress about the discrepancy, and Behn seems unable to subject her hero or heroine to the actual indignities of plantation labor. Although *Oroonoko* and *Imoinda* are not free, they are always distinguished by the narrator and her circle, implying that, no matter what geographic dislocations occur, persons "of quality" will always recognize and attempt to protect one another.

Finally, comparing texts about Africa and the Caribbean reveals not only that early slave traders needed to distinguish between Africans and therefore often spoke out against anti-African prejudice, sounding very much like the narrator of *Oroonoko*, but also that humanitarian reformers sometimes hastened the process of racialization. To be sure, slavery is to be blamed for that process, but it was unwittingly furthered by those who, considering themselves the slaves' advocates, attempted to erase the cultural and religious differences between slaves

and masters. As the debate over the 1659 parliamentary petition of two political prisoners indicates (see Part Two, Chapter 5), it was possible to sell not only Christians but also Englishmen into lifelong involuntary servitude in the mid-seventeenth century, but not even the parties to the sale of these Englishmen seemed willing to defend the practice. Instead, the debaters on both sides tended to acknowledge that Christians and especially Englishmen (because members of a peculiarly "free" polity) should not be enslaved. Such a widespread belief that Christians should not be held in bondage made West Indian planters reluctant to baptize their slaves or to suppress their African cultural and religious practices (see Godwyn, p. 365, and Tryon, p. 365). If, in the words of the Barbados Assembly's 1661 Act "for the better ordering and governing of Negroes," Africans required special laws because they were "an heathenish, brutish and an uncertaine, dangerous kinde of people . . . without the knowledge of God in the world" (qtd. in Dunn 239), the efforts to convert them could only work against the rationale of the slave laws, which were based on the assumption of the slaves' religious and cultural inferiority. Christian reformers like Morgan Godwyn, concerned to improve the lot of the slaves and encourage fairer treatment from masters, quite reasonably urged that the bond of a common religion would help the masters to see their slaves as fellow humans, but seventeenth-century masters replied that fellowship was inconsistent with the master-slave relation. Nevertheless, the Christianizers made some headway: some slaves were baptized, and many African ways were forgotten or even outlawed. To be sure, West Indian slaves in general were never as fully acculturated to English laws and customs as continental North American slaves, but nevertheless they became less religiously and culturally distinct in the eighteenth century.

British-American slavery eventually racialized its participants so completely that even its reformers and enemies were trapped inside that dynamic. Lessening the religious and other cultural distinctions between masters and slaves may have encouraged more humane treatment, but it also made the remaining distinctions — the external markers of racial difference, especially skin color — assume even greater prominence. It became increasingly untenable to hold the 1677 opinion that slaves could be owned and traded because they "were infidels, and the *subjects of an infidel prince*" (see p. 417) when they were children born to Christian parents in a British colony. As "Christian" became a less important distinguishing category for masters, they took refuge in the classification "English." But as the slaves

became less culturally African, the British West Indies became a discrete entity, and a few black writers even began asserting their literacy, mastery of English culture, and permanent residence in England (see Equiano, pp. 310–25, pp. 391–92, and pp. 458–63, and Sancho, pp. 451–58); “Englishness,” too, became an unreliable category for marking the crucial difference between those born into bondage and those born free. What had earlier been a plethora of distinctions was boiled down to one: racial difference. As the slaves ceased to be “Africans,” they became merely “negroes,” while the masters, and even their Scots and Irish servants, started calling themselves “whites.” The conditions were established for modern racial perceptions.

In *Oroonoko*, the words *black* and *white* are certainly used, but the hero normally speaks, in less exclusively racial terms, of his countrymen and the Christians. The narrator presents Oroonoko as learned in European lore but adamantly opposed to European religion, and his opposition is essential to his heroic integrity. As we will see in the next section of this introduction, Oroonoko descends from a well-established line of truth-telling infidels and noble savages (see Mandeville, pp. 166–68, Jonson, pp. 175–79, and Tryon, pp. 368–75) whose criticism is authorized by their very cultural and religious differences from their European interlocutors. Maintaining that distance not only renders Oroonoko consistent as a character but also permits the sharpening of an independent, antagonistic perspective on Christian values as the tale progresses. During his incarceration, the hero begins by scorning Christianity’s ignoble and selfish emphasis on punishment in an after-life, as opposed to his country’s code of honor that forbids “*offending and diseasing all Mankind*” (p. 65). After his rebellion is betrayed, he exclaims that the cowards who deserted him “wanted but to be whipt into the knowledge of the *Christian Gods* to be the vilest of all creeping things; to learn to Worship such Deities as had not Power to make ’em Just, Brave, or Honest” (p. 90).

Oroonoko’s valiant anti-Christian defiance had a history in European letters, and it also had both a past and a future in the British West Indies generally and Suriname particularly. Seven slave revolts took place in the British islands between 1640 and 1713 (Dunn 256), but Suriname, on the mainland, was the site of the most successful rebellions. As early as the 1660s, a group of self-emancipated former slaves, led by Coromantines like Oroonoko, were raiding plantations there (Price 23–24). And, as the passages from John Gabriel Stedman’s *Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (see

pp. 377–90) attest, Africans continued to rebel successfully against their European masters, migrating into the rain forests of Suriname, and establishing independent and populous communities there. Despite numerous efforts to destroy them, those communities won their autonomy, and, according to anthropologists, became preserves of West African civilization transplanted to South America. It is fitting that Aphra Behn’s tale of heroic insubordination should have been set in that Caribbean country where thousands of Africans were able to refuse both slavery and Europeanization.

LITERARY TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN OROONOKO

Aphra Behn was not trying to provide us with a record of Caribbean slavery or a prediction about its future; she aimed, rather, to blend three popular forms of Restoration literature: the New World travel story, the courtly romance, and the heroic tragedy. There were some precedents for this combination. For example, in 1664, the leading playwright of the age, John Dryden, had coauthored a play called *The Indian Queen* — a play to which Behn specifically refers in the opening pages of *Oroonoko* — and had written a sequel called *The Indian Emperor* the following year (see pp. 180–90). Behn was certainly familiar with both plays. In the latter, Aztec and Spanish heroes act out their amours, jealousies, and a complex code of honor in the course of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. This clash of worlds — the conflict between hitherto completely separate cultures — and the downfall of a great empire seemed intrinsically tragic material to the English. Moreover, both Aztec royalty and Spanish conquistadores are thoroughly heroic in Dryden’s play because they are equally susceptible to the promptings of love and honor. The heroes on both sides belong to a universal, natural aristocracy, which allows them to admire each other’s honesty, bravery, and chivalry, while a cross-cultural romance between Hernán Cortés and an Indian princess creates the conflict between love and honor that necessitates tragedy. Dryden’s play presents the Aztecs as a doomed but noble race. Two decades before Behn wrote *Oroonoko*, then, Dryden had brought together courtly romance and heroic tragedy in a New World setting, imagining the European conquest of the Americas as a catastrophically inevitable event redeemed by heroic self-sacrifice.

By alluding to one of Dryden's American plays in the opening pages of *Oroonoko* (see pp. 37–100), Behn indicates some of the generic assumptions within which her tale will unfold. We will encounter exotic worlds, but the noble heroes will behave according to universally understood codes of love and honor. Europeans are destined to triumph in their encounters with other peoples, but the certainty of the outcome only increases the tragic, heroic potential of the conquered. Finally, a conflict between love and honor will require a tragic resolution. Each of these elements finds its place in *Oroonoko*, but the mixture is far from conventional. Behn, in fact, undertook a much more difficult task than Dryden's. First, her New World setting is the contemporary British Caribbean, not the Mexico of the previous century; hence, her villains are English. She cannot, like Dryden, blame the cruelty she reports on Spanish priests and the decrees of a distant tyrant, but must instead own them as part of current English colonialism. Dryden's tragedy resembles a myth of origins; it describes the remote events leading to European supremacy in the Americas. But Behn brings her readers news of a little-known place, "a Colony in *America*, called *Surinam*, in the *West Indies*" (p. 38), where the natives are friendly trading partners still living in Edenic bliss: "With these People, . . . we live in perfect Tranquillity, and good Understanding, as it behooves us to do" (p. 40). Half of the news in the opening pages is of the peaceful coexistence of Europeans and Caribs, but the other half is of slavery: "before I give you the Story of this *Gallant Slave*, 'tis fit I tell you the manner of bringing them to these new *Colonies*; for those they make use of there, are not *Natives* of the place" (p. 38). Behn assumes her readers must be told of the mere existence of African slaves in the Caribbean. This New World, where the treatment of unspoiled natives sharply contrasts with that of "*Negro's*, *Black-Slaves* altogether" (p. 41), is unprecedented in English literature.

In the beginning of *Oroonoko*, in other words, the New World is simultaneously a marvelous prelapsarian paradise and the thoroughly commercialized crossroads of international trade, described in alternately lyrical and utilitarian terms:

[The Indians] will shoot down Oranges, and other Fruit [with bow and arrow], and only touch the Stalk with the Darts Points, that they may not hurt the Fruit. So that they being, on all Occasions, very useful to us, we find it absolutely necessary to caress 'em as Friends, and not to treat 'em as Slaves; nor dare we do other, their Number so far surpassing ours in that *Continent*. (p. 41)

The place seems appropriate to a romantic idyll or perhaps a middle-class comic drama — like Behn's own *The Widdow Ranter* (posthumously staged in 1689) or George Colman's later *Inkle and Yarico* (1787) — but it does not at first appear a promising setting for heroic tragedy. The English are straightforwardly presented as opportunists in their dealings with both Indians and Africans, and their activities are reported by the narrator as neutral facts, devoid of moral significance. The potential for heroic tragedy must be imported, literally, in the person of Oroonoko.

Behn not only portrays a different New World from any before seen in English literature but also tries to envision a different Old World. By following the trade route back across the Atlantic to Africa, instead of Europe, she becomes the first English author who attempted to render the life lived by sub-Saharan African characters on their own continent. Some travelers' accounts of coastal African kingdoms were in circulation at the time, and we can point to the decorative appearance of a few earlier royal Africans in English literature, either as metaphorical figures or as visitors paying homage to the English monarch, but as a narrative exercise, the African episodes of *Oroonoko* are unique. Since it was entirely novel to tell the story of a royal African in sub-Saharan Africa, it should not surprise us that Behn draws on the conventions of the Oriental romance, a popular genre at the time, to give her African episodes a recognizable shape. Indeed, Behn included a conversation that she took verbatim from Gabriel de Bremond's Oriental tale *Hattigé* (1676). Star-crossed young lovers trying to outwit a lustful but impotent and aged tyrant, a harem intrigue, and a farcical subplot in which the hero's friend seduces an older woman were all standard ingredients of the Oriental romance. Although these narrative conventions may seem creaky and inappropriate to modern readers, they probably helped the average seventeenth-century English reader to accept a pair of black Africans as bona fide lovers deserving of their sympathy.

We modern readers of *Oroonoko* feel the strain of the triangular trade's contradictory emotional demands most keenly in the passages that explicitly confront seventeenth-century English attitudes toward Africans, attitudes we now call racial prejudice. *Oroonoko's* narrator assumes that she must overcome her readers' biases, especially their refusal to believe that Africans could be truly heroic, and yet many of her efforts themselves now strike us as racist. To increase Oroonoko's credibility, she repeatedly stresses his difference from African

commoners, giving him a European education and facial features. Twentieth-century readers have reason to complain that Oroonoko, despite his scornful rejection of Christianity, seems in many respects like a European in blackface. We should realize, though, that the modern idea of race as a set of genetically inheritable traits shared by populations, and its concomitant potential for modern racism — the belief that some populations are genetically inferior to others — had not yet been invented in the seventeenth century. The slave trade was establishing the conditions for such beliefs, but the English prejudices against Africans that Behn encountered and shared were a much more ad hoc set of ideas about the barbarous manners and generally uncivilized state of heathen people, whose moral darkness was believed to manifest itself in their complexions.

Sometimes these ideas were supplemented by the opinion that Africans were descended from Cain or from Ham, the accursed son of Noah, and were therefore marked out by God for special punishment. This belief, which takes dark skin to be a marker of an inheritable moral or intellectual baseness, is the immediate precursor of later “scientific” racism. Behn’s contemporary, John Milton, seems to endorse such a biblical justification for enslaving Africans in *Paradise Lost* (1667), when he has Michael say,

Yet sometimes Nations will decline so low
From virtue, which is reason, that no wrong
But Justice, and some fatal curse annex
Deprives them of their outward liberty,
Their inward lost: Witness th’irreverant Son
Of him who built the Ark, who for the shame
Done to his Father, heard this heavy curse,
Servant of Servants, on his vicious Race. (XII, ll. 97–104)

The story of Ham was increasingly read as biblical authorization for British slaveholding and slave trading (Jordan 17–19; Hill 398–99), but the narrator of *Oroonoko* shows no awareness of such thinking.

In *Oroonoko*, slavery is portrayed as a practical, economic matter; it neither needs nor gets transcendental authorization. The English cannot enslave Indians (they would if they could), so they are forced to buy slaves where there is a market in such commodities; the market happens to be in Africa. Some Africans are “by Nature Slaves” (p. 90), that is, cowards, and some, like Oroonoko, Imoinda, Aboan, Jamoan, and Tuscan, are not. For Behn, the distinction is mainly one of rank: black people of “Quality” are brave; commoners are not. We should

recall that *race* in the seventeenth century meant any genealogically related group: families, dynasties, clans, nations, aristocracies, and peasantries could all be spoken of as separate races. Behn, like virtually all of her contemporaries, believed that some of these races were naturally superior to others and deserved greater power. But the natural hierarchy represented in *Oroonoko* is not one of color. Far from considering blackness a sign of divine displeasure, Behn waxes lyrical over the fact that Oroonoko is so much blacker than his countrymen. The narrator, in short, presses no generalizations that apply to all Africans. She sometimes accedes to certain prevailing European opinions about most Africans — that they were barbarous and ignorant — perhaps in order to make herself reliable and her claims about the hero believable. But she also resists and deflects the gathering current of racial prejudice lest it wipe out the possibility of a noble class of natural African rulers. The narrator wants her readers to be surprised by the appearance of a tragic black African; to amaze them, however, she must overcome their stubborn disbelief.

The English literary tradition provided very few precedents for an African tragic hero. One might, of course, point to Othello, and certainly the two heroes have some things in common: they are both great warriors and unfortunate lovers; they struggle to maintain their honor; their enemies are motivated by racial hatred; and they slay their wives. In adapting *Oroonoko* to the stage in 1695, Thomas Southerne emphasized the parallels, but the original tale has surprisingly few Shakespearean echoes. Oroonoko is the noble African conceived within the new Atlantic context, whereas Othello is the African filtered through the Mediterranean Renaissance world. Unlike Othello, Oroonoko serves no Christian ruler, but is instead the prince of his own West African nation. Although he is warlike and passionate, Behn characterizes her hero as circumspect, skeptical, and astoundingly self-possessed; he loves an African woman, not a European (Southerne changed this, too), and his devotion is unwavering. In other words, Oroonoko is more thoroughly heroic than his predecessor: his initial social standing is higher, and he falls through no fault of his own. Shakespeare’s hero is certainly one of Behn’s models, but Oroonoko strives to be the nobler Moor.

If the Noble Moor is one of Oroonoko’s progenitors, the candid infidel or noble savage is another. The passages from Mandeville, Montaigne, and Tryon included in this volume (see Part Two, Chapters 2 and 4) all contain instances of this figure: a pagan or barbarian whose vantage point inverts normal European perceptions, providing

a satiric foil for reflections on Christian civilization. Passing their judgments through the perceptions of a despised outsider, these works at once estrange “normal” reality, making it seem alien, and create the shock for European readers of being negatively judged by those usually considered their inferiors. Sir John Mandeville’s late medieval version of the figure of the Pagan is an Egyptian Sultan, a Muslim and therefore an infidel, who speaks for a powerful, competing civilization. In the Renaissance, Michel de Montaigne relocated the figure to “America” and made “Nature” the source of his superior wisdom. He also attempted a complete overthrow of the reader’s moral assumptions by comparing European ways unfavorably to the most outrageously “savage” reported Amerindian practice — cannibalism. In *Oroonoko*, the narrator’s claim that it is kinder to practice polygamy, as the Africans do, than to discard former mistresses after the Christian custom, echoes Montaigne’s satiric voice. Thomas Tryon, writing a dialogue between a slave and his master in the 1670s, brought together aspects of Mandeville’s and Montaigne’s characters: Tryon’s heathen is African, like the Sultan, but an Ethiopian rather than an Egyptian; he lives in America, like the cannibals. He resembles the Amerindians, too, in his adherence to nature; like Mandeville’s Sultan, though, he disdains only the hypocrisy of European practices, not the substance of Christian beliefs.

Tryon’s Ethiopian and Behn’s Royal Slave, although belonging to the same literary tradition, make a striking contrast. The Ethiopian believes in the superiority of his own country’s manners and makes a thorough catalogue of the inhumanity and brutality of his Christian captors; nevertheless he praises Christian doctrine and serves his master obediently, whereas Oroonoko refuses to separate Christian manners and beliefs, nor can he be reconciled to his bondage. Like the tame discursive tool that he is, Tryon’s Ethiopian meekly retires after saying his piece. But Oroonoko is more than just another noble savage rhetorically turning tables on surprised Europeans. He is that figure, that trope, that literary device suddenly sprung into violently animated defiance. The narrator may quote Oroonoko’s satiric speeches with pride, but she is also terrified that, when he is done jesting, he will “Cut all our Throats” (p. 92).

Indeed, Oroonoko’s right to such a revenge is never seriously questioned because he partakes of an essence loftier than mere heroism, one that approaches divinity: kingship. The noble Moor and the noble savage both went into his making, but it was royalty — a quality beyond both of those literary models — that seems to have captured

Behn’s imagination. The story of a king encountered as a slave in an English colony was irresistible because it allowed her to explore at close range the mind and behavior of a disempowered prince: from Behn’s point of view, the supreme tragic figure of modern history. The Western literary tradition is so thick with instances of deposed, captured, disgraced, and otherwise dishonored kings, that it would be impossible to trace out Oroonoko’s long lineage here. Moreover, the association of these unfortunate sovereigns with tragedy has been proverbial since Aristotle.

OROONOKO AND KINGSHIP

In 1688, Behn was not thinking just of the history of tragedy; she was also thinking about the history of England in her own lifetime as a tragedy. *Oroonoko* was written in the last year of the period we call the Restoration, which began with the return of the Stuarts, in the person of Charles II, to the throne of England in 1660. Charles II was the son of Charles I, who had been beheaded in 1649 during the English Revolution, or Civil War, in which the crown and Parliament struggled for control of the state. The restoration of the monarchy followed an eleven-year interregnum, during which the Puritan military leader Oliver Cromwell ruled until his death in 1658; Puritan rule was then precariously maintained for almost two more years. The restoration of the monarchy did not, however, end the conflict between the crown and Parliament. Tory Royalists pressed to restore many of the king’s old prerogatives, and some even renewed claims for his divine right to absolute power.⁸ On the other side, the Whigs who controlled Parliament strove to limit the power of the restored royal family, and the issue reached a climax during the Exclusion Crisis of 1679–81, when Parliament tried to pass a bill forbidding any Catholic from succeeding to the throne. Since such a law would have excluded the heir apparent, Charles’s brother James, the king prevented it, but James’s succession remained a sore point. He was peacefully crowned James II after his brother’s death in 1685, but his policies seemed to favor Catholics. Defiance in Parliament and dislike in the population at large increased until, on the birth of a son to his Catholic wife and the consequent

⁸ In this period, for example, Sir Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha* was published. Written in the 1640s, it argued that the king has a divine right of *ownership* over his subjects. Soon after the Glorious Revolution, the first of John Locke’s *Two Treatises on Government* (1690) explicitly refuted that view.

prospect of a new line of Catholic monarchs, the powerful peers of the realm invited James's Protestant daughter, Mary (the offspring of an earlier marriage), and her husband, William of Orange, to take the throne. James II fled in 1688, and the accession of William and Mary, known as the Glorious or Bloodless Revolution, settled the balance of power in English politics.

Since Aphra Behn was a well-known royalist and outspoken supporter of James II, writing the story of an unfortunate king in the very year of the forced abdication of her sovereign, her contemporaries would probably have associated her royal hero with her royal Stuart patrons. And the narrator encourages such an association. For example, she has Oroonoko express his abhorrence of the execution of Charles I to prove his own qualification as a prince. Moreover, when the lieutenant governor tries to arrest her hero, she presents the dispute between Oroonoko's defenders and attackers as a replay of the drama surrounding the trial and execution of Charles I. The overseer of Lord Willoughby's plantation at Parham, where Oroonoko recovers after his disastrous insurrection, tells the lieutenant governor and the colony's council that their "Command did not extend to his Lord's *Plantation*; and that *Parham* was as much exempt from the Law as *White-hall*; and that they ought no more to touch the Servants of the Lord [Willoughby] — (who there represented the King's Person) than they cou'd those about the King himself" (p. 94). In this passage, Oroonoko is a literal stand-in for his lord, Willoughby, who in turn stands in for "the King himself" — Charles II by the early 1660s — and is thus above the law and reach of common men. Oroonoko here is also a metaphoric representative of Charles I, who tried, after his defeat by parliamentary forces, to defend himself against the charge that he was guilty of treason for levying war against Parliament. Like the subjects of the Stuarts, moreover, Oroonoko's own people betray him and are consequently bitterly reproached. Behn considered the treatment of James II to be a replay of the trial and execution of Charles I, and contemporary readers would certainly have recognized the fate of James II, deposed and exiled, in this tale of a king who endures a crushing reversal of fortune. The excessive violence at the end of Behn's story, therefore, leaves behind not just images of one "mangled King" (p. 100) but of many. And yet the mangling, imagined as both a stoic ordeal and a martyrdom, results in the apotheosis of the king, who is memorialized, and therefore perpetuates his kingly essence, in the very tragedy we have just read. *Oroonoko* must be read

as a paean to kingship in general and a lament for its recent indignities and defeats.

OROONOKO IN THE CONTEXT OF APHRA BEHN'S CAREER

Aphra Behn identified with mistreated monarchs. As a playwright, she styled herself "a King of Wit" and cast her audience in the role of "A Parliament, by Play-Bill, summoned here"⁹; but her theatrical parliament, like Charles II's real one in 1682, refused to supply the poet-king's tribute, that is, to support the playwright financially. She also identified with people who were turned into commodities, who were bought and sold, especially with prostitutes and middle-class women forced into unhappy marriages for money. She sometimes compared such women to slaves, and recent critics have noticed¹⁰ that the early episodes of Imoinda's story in *Oroonoko* resemble those of other forced brides in Behn's works. Married women at the time belonged to their husbands as a form of nonalienable property, and Behn's portrait of a heroine who is actually sold into chattel slavery seems to be on a continuum with her vivid depictions of the many ways in which European women were also bartered. In her play *The Luckey Chance* (ca. 1686), for example, a husband gives his creditor the sexual use of his wife for one night in order to cover a gambling debt. Some form of commodification is the fate of most women in Behn's stories and plays, and she even ironically likened her situation as an author, striving to please a novelty-seeking public, to that of a prostitute in the prologue to her first play, *The Forced Marriage* (1670). Oroonoko, as a king who becomes a commodity, seems a conflation of the author's two favorite metaphors for her own profession. The tale, in other words, can also be read as a reflection on the career of this writer who has gone down in history as the first professional woman author in English.

Scholars are still pondering the mystery and significance of Aphra Behn's career. Since most of her works are seldom read today, and since we continue to believe in a strong prejudice against women writers in the seventeenth century, we have trouble making sense of her

⁹ "Epilogue" to *The Second Part of the Rover*.

¹⁰ See, for example, Ballaster 82–84 and Margaret Ferguson 159–81.

early acclaim. It strains our historical imagination and our sense of cultural continuity to realize that, after John Dryden, Behn was the most prolific and probably the most popular playwright of her time, the author of at least eighteen plays, as well as several volumes of poetry and numerous works of fiction that were in vogue for decades after her death. She was second only to Dryden also in the number of plays (four) produced at court. Moreover, most of the male writers to whom we might compare her had advantages of education and family that she lacked. Behn's origins are obscure; she was certainly not what she claimed to be in *Oroonoko*, that is, the legitimate daughter of the governor or intended governor of Suriname. We simply do not know how she received her education or her introduction to literary and theatrical circles.¹¹

Behn's works, however, show that she capitalized on her femaleness and even sought, playfully, to intensify the odor of scandal that hung about her as a woman earning her living in public. Her writings were risqué, roguish, and outspokenly partisan; she purposely courted controversy and made herself into a sensational commodity. In the first decade of her literary career, 1672–82, her authorial persona is usually seductive, coaxing, and comical. But a somewhat more serious strain emerges in the works of the mid-1680s. These were very bad economic times for both the London theaters and the court, Behn's two best sources of income, and we might reasonably conclude that the writer's self-sale was beginning to seem more pathetic than comical. A slackening demand for plays forced Behn to write tales, scandalous chronicles, translations from works in languages she only half understood, and numerous poems. Her sense of being an exploited hack seems to have increased as the decade wore on, as did her identification with the equally unappreciated and mistreated heir to the English throne. Two of her last compositions were a celebratory ode on the coronation of James II and a "Congratulatory Poem" on the birth of his son (see pp. 154–56). Another of her last compositions was *Oroonoko*. Dying in 1688, Behn did not long survive these testimonials to the sovereignty of kingship.

Oroonoko can also be read as a testimonial to an ideal of sovereign authorship, authorship that is self-sustaining. It is the most self-

¹¹ Biographies of Aphra Behn speculate about her early life and education, coming to very different conclusions. See Todd, *Secret Life*, for the most recent and authoritative account. See also Duffy and Goreau. For a concise overview of Behn's career, see Todd's introduction to *The Works of Aphra Behn* 1: ix–xxxv.

referential of Behn's narratives. In many of her tales, the narrator is anonymous or is a person who gets her information secondhand from servants or other marginal characters. In contrast, the narrator of *Oroonoko* loudly announces herself as Aphra Behn, a writer already known to the public as a playwright, whose established reputation should guarantee her veracity. She even discusses her next play, stressing that, like *Oroonoko*, it is based to some extent on her life experience (p. 92). Clearly, Behn highlights narratorial-authorial continuity as a guarantee of the tale's authenticity. As a character in the tale, Behn also parallels herself with Oroonoko. Like him, she arrives a stranger in Suriname but is immediately recognized as superior to the local inhabitants; like him, she appears a shining marvel when she travels to the Indian village; and like his words, hers are always supposed to be truthful. The sustained authorial presence in this book is thus closely connected to the hero's black luster; as the story moves forward, narrator and hero brighten each other's celebrity. Although, in the beginning, Oroonoko had the misfortune "to fall in an obscure world, that afforded only a female pen to celebrate his fame" (p. 69), by the end the narrator presumes to hope "the Reputation of my Pen is considerable enough to make his Glorious Name to survive to all ages" (p. 100).

This is a degree of self-congratulation unprecedented in Behn's writings, but the sentiment is, after all, elegiac: what is left of Oroonoko is only his "Glorious Name." Indeed, Oroonoko could not be a hero of the very highest order — a tragic hero — unless he had sacrificed his life. The last sentence also hints at a certain reciprocity: if Behn's reputation preserves Oroonoko after his execution, then Oroonoko, as the author's greatest hero, will also keep Behn's name alive "to all ages." This implicit bid for her own immortality evokes the author's consciousness of her impending death; the posthumous adventures of herself and her kingly hero, she seems to realize, will be closely intertwined.

OROONOKOS

Behn's *Oroonoko* did, in fact, keep her name in the literary histories for hundreds of years after her death. Even the Victorians, who thought her other works obscene, praised it: "When Mrs. Behn's shortcomings are remembered against her 'Oroonoko' should be put to her credit; it is instinct with real feeling and womanly sympathy"

(A. M. Williams 590). *Womanly* is the key word here; readers in each century have been able to reconcile this one story of Behn's with their ideas of what a *woman* writer should accomplish. Late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century readers saw *Oroonoko* primarily as a heroic love story, complete with a royal protagonist who performs deeds of superhuman strength and stoically suffers unbelievable torments for the sake of his honor. For these readers, Oroonoko's slavery was significant primarily because it allowed him to illustrate the belief that nobility is inborn and manifests itself even under the most adverse circumstances. Later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commentators, like the Victorian quoted above, read *Oroonoko* more as a sentimental than as a heroic tale. They thought its ruling emotion was sympathy for the downtrodden in general and slaves in particular. When Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* came out in 1852, Behn's tale was frequently identified as one of its emancipationist forerunners.¹² Twentieth-century readers have continued to categorize *Oroonoko* as social or political commentary, often stressing that the author's marginal position, imposed by her gender, provided her with the vantage point of a critical outsider. Thus some twentieth-century commentators remade this Restoration Tory into their own favorite, feminist-inspired version of the prototypical woman writer: the subversive. *Oroonoko*'s most recent critics have produced more multifaceted formal and historical analyses that regard the author's gender as one element in a complex textual mixture. Over the centuries, Behn's narrative has yielded, and continues to yield, many different *Oroonokos*, most of them the products of "womanly" writers.

There were, moreover, later *Oroonokos* with different fates, for the hero had a life of his own beyond Behn's text and its interpretations. In the French translation of 1745, for example, the ending is completely revised to allow the hero and heroine to return to Africa and live happily ever after. The more typical revisions, though, were the theatrical versions. First adapted to the stage in 1696 by Thomas Southerne (see pp. 107–31), *Oroonoko* was a huge hit; contemporaries thought it as good as, if not better than, *Othello*. As the passages from the play reprinted in this volume attest, Southerne's hero is more decorous and conventional than Behn's. He cannot bring himself, for example, to deliver the coup de grâce to his European Imoinda, who stabs herself with the dagger he holds, and he certainly does not cut off her face or lie down beside her rotting body. Moreover, the play begins with

¹² See, for example, "England's First Lady Novelist" 854.

Oroonoko's arrival in Suriname, and no mention is made of his previous involvement with the slave trade. In later theatrical revisions, the slave trade becomes a more prominent thematic issue. In 1760, John Hawkesworth excised Southerne's comic subplot as unworthy of such a weighty drama and an anonymous writer added the dialogue on slavery reprinted in this volume (see pp. 132–40). Later versions are even more outspokenly antislavery, and we might surmise that one reason Behn's slave-trading king could be read as an antislavery hero by the 1850s was that most Victorians filtered her text through the stage versions they had seen.

This volume adds even more *Oroonokos* to the number already in circulation, inviting you to reflect on the many versions of this character that inhabited the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British imagination. In the century after *Oroonoko*'s publication, English literature became increasingly thick with "Guinea's Captive Kings"¹³; it is hoped that the collection of surrounding texts in Part Two of this volume will encourage you to think beyond the literary works into the general discourse about slaves and their destinies. Stedman's rebellious Baron is an *Oroonoko* whose insurrection succeeded; the Young Prince of Annamaboe is another whose father forced the English to send him home. Equiano is a third who purchased his freedom and agitated for the abolition of slavery. The more these alternative stories resonate with and against Aphra Behn's tragedy, the deeper its significance for us becomes.

¹³ For a history of this figure in English literature, see Sypher.

Chronology of Behn's Life and Times

1640

Probable year of Aphra Behn's birth. Her parents might have been Bartholomew and Elizabeth Johnson of Kent. Nothing is known of her early life and education.

Marks the beginning of the devotion of English holdings in the Caribbean to sugar production.

1642

Outbreak of the Civil War, sometimes called the "Puritan Revolution," in England.

Theaters closed.

1643–45

Short-lived English settlement in Suriname.

1649

Charles I tried and executed. Oliver Cromwell becomes head of state of the newly established Commonwealth.

1651–52

Guinea Company founded to trade on the West Coast of Africa for ivory, gold, and slaves.

Francis, Lord Willoughby, establishes a colony in Suriname.

Thomas Hobbes publishes *Leviathan*, an argument for absolute monarchy on secular, rather than religious, grounds.

1653

Oliver Cromwell named Lord Protector.

1658

Oliver Cromwell dies, and his son Richard is unable to maintain the Protectorate.

1660

Charles II, who has been in exile in France, returns to England, and the Stuart monarchy is restored.

Two theater companies chartered, the King's Players and the Duke's Company.

Company of Royal Adventurers into Africa is chartered, replacing the Guinea Company. They begin major trading activity for ivory, gold, and slaves under a new charter three years later.

Samuel Pepys, an administrator in the Navy Office, begins keeping his diary, which he continued for nine years. Published in the nineteenth century, it is the fullest account of life in Restoration London.

1662

Charles II charters the Royal Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge, thus granting official approval to the fledgling natural sciences.

Samuel Butler publishes first part of *Hudibras*.

1663–64

Behn probably a visitor to Suriname.

1665

The last major outbreak of the Plague in England ravages the nation.

1665–67

Second Dutch War effectually destroys the Company of Royal Adventurers and also results in the ceding of Suriname to the Dutch.

John Dryden's *Indian Emperor* produced.

1666

Great Fire of London destroys two-thirds of the city.

John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* published.

1667

Behn serves as a spy in Antwerp.
Publication of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

1670

Behn's first play, *The Forced Marriage*, performed by the Duke's Company.

1671

Behn's *The Amorous Prince* produced.

1672

Behn edits a collection of poetry, *Covent Garden Drollery*.
Royal African Company established, replacing the previous Company of Royal Adventurers.
William Wycherly's *The Country Wife* produced.

1673

Behn's *The Dutch Lover* produced.
Passage of the Test Act, requiring all holders of civil and military offices to conform to Anglican church rites. It excluded both nonconforming Protestants (Puritans) and Roman Catholics from public life.
Between this year and 1689, the Royal African Company ships 26,245 enslaved Africans to Barbados.

1676

Behn's only tragedy, *Abdelazer*, and *The Town-Fopp* produced.
George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* produced.

1677

Behn's *The Debauchee* and her most successful play, *The Rover*, produced.
John Dryden's *All for Love* produced.

1678

Behn's *Sir Patient Fancy* produced.
John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come* published.

1678–81

Popish Plot divides England and forces the creation of the first political parties, the Whigs and the Tories.

1679

Behn's *The Young King* and *The Feign'd Curtizans* produced.

1680

Behn's *The Revenge* produced.

1681

Behn's *The Second Part of the Rover* and *The False Count* produced.
Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* published.

1681–82

Behn's *The Roundheads* produced.
Whigs in Parliament try to exclude Charles II's brother James from the line of succession to the throne because of his Catholicism, precipitating the Exclusion Crisis.

1682

Behn's *The City-Heiress* produced.
Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* published.

1684

Behn's *Poems upon Several Occasions* published, as is the first part of her *Love Letters Between a Nobleman And His Sister*. This scandalous tale, which was destined to be continued in two much longer volumes, retailed amorous intrigues in the circle of the banished James Scott, Duke of Monmouth and bastard son of Charles II, whom many Protestants wished would succeed his father.

1685

Charles II dies; James II is crowned his successor. The Duke of Monmouth returns from abroad and tries to lead a rebellion against his uncle. He is defeated and executed.
Behn publishes poems mourning Charles's death and celebrating the succession of James in *Miscellany, Being a collection of poems By several Hands*.
The Second Part of Behn's *Love Letters* appears, attacking Monmouth.
Behn publishes her translation of François, duc de La Rochefoucauld's *Réflexions ou sentences et maximes morales* (1675) as *Seneca Unmasked*.
Import taxes are doubled, significantly increasing the cost of such products as sugar, and the West Indian interests increasingly complain about taxation and monopoly.

1686

Behn's *The Luckey Chance* produced.

Behn's very loose translation of Balthazar de Bonnecourse's *La montre* published under the same title.

1687

The Third Part of the *Love Letters* is published.

Behn's *Emperor of the Moon* produced.

1688

Behn publishes *Oroonoko*, *The Fair Jilt*, *Agnes de Castro*, and numerous poems in *Lycidus . . . Together with a Miscellany of New Poems by Several Hands*. The latter volume also includes her translation of Abbé Paul Tallemant's *Le second voyage de l'Isle d'Amour* (1664).

Behn translates Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686) as *A Discovery of New Worlds* and his *L'histoire des oracles* (1687) as *The History of Oracles*.

1689

Behn dies on April 16 and is buried in Westminster Abbey.

Behn's *The Lucky Mistake* and *The History of the Nun* posthumously published and her *The Widdow Ranter* posthumously produced.

The Glorious Revolution leads to the abdication of James II and the coronation of William and Mary of Orange.

Official support for the Royal African Company weakens.

1690

Behn's *The Widdow Ranter* posthumously published.

John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *Two Treatises on Government* published.

1694

Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* published.

1695

Price of slaves in the West Indies begins to increase, stabilizing at approximately £8 sterling in 1705.

William Congreve's *Love for Love* produced.

1696

The Histories and Novels of the late Ingenious Mrs Behn, which includes works previously unpublished, is brought out.

Behn's *The Younger Brother* posthumously produced and published.

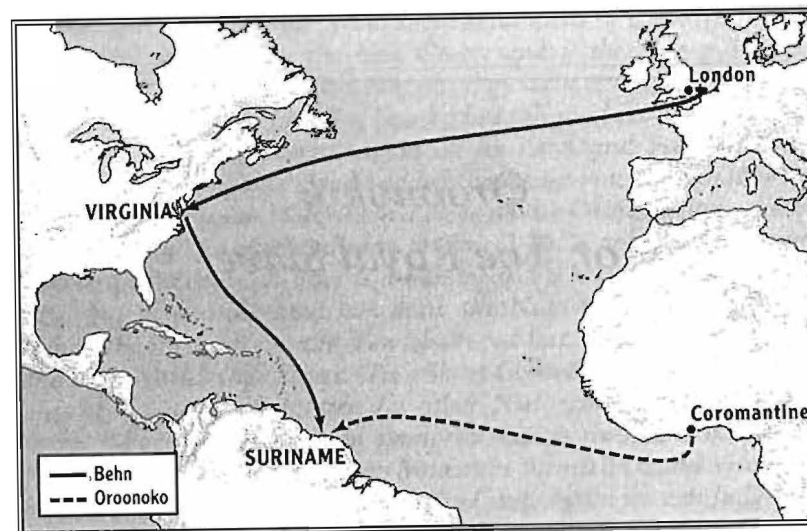
1698

Ten Percent Act formally terminates Royal African Company's monopoly; private slave trade becomes legal.

A Note on the Text

This volume reprints Janet Todd's 1995 edition of *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave*, published in London by William Pickering in *The Works of Aphra Behn*, volume 3, pp. 50–119. We thank Pickering & Chatto Publishers for permission to use this edition. Todd based her work on the text of *OROONOKO: Or, The Royal Slave in Three Histories . . . By Mrs. A. BEHN*, published in London in 1688, "printed for W. Canning, at his Shop in the Temple-Cloysters." Earlier in the same year, Canning had issued *Oroonoko* in a single volume; in *Three Histories* it is bound with *The Fair Jilt* and *Agnes de Castro*. Students should be aware that the Pickering edition retains the original seventeenth-century spelling, punctuation, and other textual peculiarities. We have added footnotes when seventeenth-century usage departs significantly from that of our day and have put in quotation marks spellings of place names that differ from the modern.

In Part Two, texts are normally either from first editions or from the standard scholarly editions; they have not been modified, although the long "s" has been modernized where it appears. When first editions have not been used, the text is specified in the headnote to the selection.



Behn and Oroonoko, 1663

The narrator of *Oroonoko* claims to have traveled one side of the Atlantic triangle, from England to the Caribbean. It is speculated that the historic Aphra Behn might have stopped off in Virginia, since she wrote a play about that colony demonstrating considerable familiarity with it. Oroonoko is said to have been shipped directly from the Gold Coast of Africa to Suriname. The solid line on the above map represents Behn's probable route, and the dotted line represents Oroonoko's journey.