



## Oroonoko, The Rover, and Other Works

*Aphra Behn, Janet Todd (Editor)*

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'We are bought and sold like apes or monkeys, to be the sport of women, fools, and cowards, and the support of rogues'

When Prince Oroonoko's passion for the virtuous Imoinda arouses the jealousy of his grandfather, the lovers are cast into slavery and transported from Africa to the colony of Surinam. Oroonoko's noble bearing soon wins the respect of his English captors, but his struggle for freedom brings about his destruction. Inspired by Aphra Behn's visit to Surinam, **Oroonoko** (1688) reflects the author's romantic view of Native Americans as simple, superior peoples – in the first state of innocence, before men knew how to sin'. The novel also reveals Behn's ambiguous attitude to African slavery – while she favoured it as a means to strengthen England's power, her powerful and moving work conveys its injustice and brutality.

This new edition of **Oroonoko** is based on the first printed edition of 1688, and includes a chronology, bibliography and notes. In her introduction, Janet Todd examines Aphra Behn's views of slavery, colonization and politics, and her position as a professional woman writer in the Restoration.

## Oroonoko, The Rover, and Other Works Details

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## From Reader Review Oroonoko, The Rover, and Other Works for online ebook

### Richard says

Both as one of the earliest professional female English authors, and as a prolific writer not only of drama, but also of prose fiction and poetry, using settings that reached beyond Europe to the New World, Aphra Behn is an important and interesting writer; and this collection provides a good selection of her work, showcasing not only its diversity, but also its varying quality.

Of the prose works given here, *Oroonoko* is by far the best: a fascinating and thought-provoking narrative that both embodies and questions contemporary views of slavery and nobility as well as providing an entertaining story.

Of the two plays, *The Widow Ranter* (also set in the American colonies) starts the more promisingly, with a colorful cast of comical drunkards and cowards alongside its more recognisable Restoration chancers, but suffers from a lack of generic focus in its baggy later acts.

Which leaves *The Rover*, a play that manages, like many Restoration comedies, not only to attract with the exuberance of its embrace of rakish license, but also to repel. Unfortunately, there is not enough of the former to make up for the latter. Behn's heroines, especially the vigorously proactive-in-love Hellena, are appealing, and represent something of an advance towards an enlightened view of equality of sexual freedom; seen especially in Willmore's opinion that "a woman's honour is not worth guarding when she has a mind to part with it." But this only goes so far. For these "Banish'd Cavaliers" sexual assault is ultimately no big deal as long as its victim is unknown to, and of a lower social class to, her attackers: "'twould anger us vileyly to be trussed up for a rape upon a maid of quality, when we only believe we ruffle a harlot." Pretty unpleasant stuff on the page, and I think (although not having seen the play performed) it would take a lot of work to make it any less so on the stage.

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### Jill says

I do agree with Woolf saying as women, we pretty much owe Aphra Behn, big time...but trying to relate to her as an ultra conservative royalist wasn't easy.

liked a lot of the characters in "The Rover"...was disappointed that Oroonoko's greatness was in some way measured by how "European looking" he was. boo :(

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### David Miller says

It's hard to know where to come down on Behn. Her life and career were very interesting, but her determined monarchism and casual racism make her difficult to accept in a modern framework. I read her mostly from a historian's perspective, and each of the works collected here offers interesting commentaries on the important issues of her time, along with the era's peculiar sense of humor. If you aren't willing or prepared to do that kind of close reading, then value may be limited.

Oroonoko, the only story in here I read way back in high school, is a prime example of why it's very important to focus on context. On the surface, it's the story of a man who would rather die than remain enslaved. That man is treated as a heroic martyr, but others in the narrative are treated as though slavery were a perfectly natural state for them. A recurring theme from Behn is that some people are just better than hoi polloi, and the suggestion that African royalty is still royalty is about as egalitarian as you're going to get from her.

The most enjoyable parts of the book are the two plays, which are really quite funny, for all the time and culture that separates us from them. Really, jokes about drunken buffoons pretending to be respectable are kind of universal. Behn also does right by her fellow ladies in writing some fantastic female characters, though as usual she implies that their best qualities are exceptions rather than rules amongst women.

As for her poetry, I found it to be more of historical than emotional interest, but that's not really a problem for me.

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### **Anja Robinson says**

17th-century tale of tragic love, class distinction, trickery and the horrors of slavery. Sad and engaging novella.

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### **Debbi says**

I was completely taken in by this novel. Behn is considered the first woman novelist and she bravely chose to write an Emancipation Novel. I felt she cleverly wrote about a highly charged subject, given her gender and the age in which she was writing. Oroonoko has his flaws but in the end he is quite sympathetic and his experiences as a slave are realistic and believable.

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### **Jossalyn says**

read for Oroonoko for westridge alum book club, Behn as the ancestor to the woman novelist; but then had to read the other novels, the plays, the poems, to get a better feel for this author. felt that an exploration of english politics of the times vastly improved the understanding of this writer's issues and biases.

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### **Hannah Polley says**

I enjoyed the short stories in this but I really struggled with the plays and could not get into them at all. The Fair Jilt was an ok story but the masterpiece is of this book is Oroonoko. A story about a Prince who is kidnapped and sold as a slave and eventually has to kill the love of his life, his unborn child and lose his own life in order to obtain freedom. This is an captivating story and one I would recommend.

However, I then moved on to the plays and they did not hold my interest and I stopped reading them

properly. There was also some poetry and love letters that were ok.

Aphra Behn was an amazing woman for her time and this is the only work of hers that I have read so was hoping for better things than the plays had to offer. However, I really did enjoy the short stories so would be interesting in reading more of her work.

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### **Demetrius Dennis says**

Oroonoko was a great read and it was very entertaining for me to read. This text sheds light on stereotypes that have been around for years. The first stereotype I want to discuss that was displayed in the text is the idea that women are thought of as less than men. This is depicted in the way that Imoinda is treated. As a women I am tired of being seen as less than men and this is a stereotype that goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. Women are seen as less than because people believe we act with our emotions rather than making logical decisions. Now I want to talk about the very apparent stereotype of race. Although Oroonoko and Imoinda were free they were easily sold into slavery because of their race. Blacks were disregarded as human being and looked at as property. Although physical slavery is no longer happening, the damage it caused still has blacks mentally enslaved. The author did a great job at shedding light on the inequality that existed then and still to this day. (184)

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### **Madeline says**

My class didn't actually read this entire work - we read "The Rover" and "The Fair Jilt." (a play and a short story, respectively)

"The Fair Jilt" was sort of boring and also irritating, because it's about a woman who falls in love with a monk (who's really a banished prince who *got* banished because of romantic fuck-ups) and when he rejects her advances she accuses him of raping her. He gets sent to prison to await execution, she goes on with her life, but at least karma comes around and bites her in the ass eventually.

I liked "The Rover" a lot more, and I can't really do it justice except by quoting the plot synopsis on the back of the book: "*The Rover* centers on the dissolute Cavalier Willmore, and the attempts of two spirited women - Angellica Bianca, a courtesan, and Hellenae, a cross-dressing virgin - to woo him."

It reminded me of one of Shakespeare's lighter comedies - romantic shenanigans and cross-dressing aplenty - but more R-rated. There's a courtesan *and* a prostitute, and not one but two scenes where the heroine almost gets raped. But the whole play is still oddly hilarious, and I wonder what it would look like presented on stage.

Read for: Women in Early British Literature

#### **UPDATE:**

Thanks to my Colonial Imagination class, I recently read *Oroonoko* as well. It's Behn's most famous work, and rightly so. Her story about an African prince who get fucked over by life over and over is sad, beautiful, well-written, and liberally sprinkled with Behn's white privilege perspective. The best example of this is when Oroonoko gets sold into slavery and put on a boat to make the infamous Middle Passage, the route that the slave ships took from Africa to South America. It was a horrendous trip, made under almost unbearable

conditions, but Behn merely says that the voyage was "tedious" and skips right ahead to when we land in South America. Whoops.

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### **Nikki says**

Of this book, I've only read the novella "Oroonoko", at least for now, for my "Addressing the Past" lectures. It was mentioned on my "Introduction to the Novel" course as one of the first real English novels, so I was pretty interested to try reading it anyway. I'd never heard of Aphra Behn before, but I was intrigued to find out that so early a novelist was a woman.

The story of Oroonoko is quite interesting in itself, but given what course I'm reading it for, I find it interesting to wonder how much of it might be based on fact. It's surprisingly easy to read, for so early a text, and not all that long. Worth a read, if you're interested in early fiction and colonial fiction.

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### **Annette Boehm says**

This novel is from the 1600s, but the language is very accessible, so don't let that keep you from reading "Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave." It's a peculiar story and definitely written from a colonial perspective. Oroonoko is black, visually, but in all other respects this character is described as 'white' -- he has all the attributes Behn's narrator finds desirable for the best and most civilized of people.

Oroonoko is not 'just' black, he is dark as ebony, with a roman nose and a beautiful body. He is 'cultured' because a Frenchman has taught him, and he is a pleasure for the colonialists to be around. Oh, and he also trades in slaves. Yes, this is not an anti-slavery novel, even though it shows the colonizers, especially at the end, as more savage than the natives.

-- if you don't want any spoilers whatsoever, don't read on below --

You can read this as a love-story: Oroonoko, victorious in battle, falls in love with the fallen captain's only daughter, Imoira. Imoira is the perfect beauty, lovely to look at, submissive, chaste, and all the men want her -- including the old king himself. The jealous king keeps the lovers apart, and when their ruse to get Oroonoko permission to enter the harem fails, he sells Imoira into slavery. Oroonoko loses all will to live but eventually recovers, still bitter over his lost love. When he, who sells his own people as slaves, gets tricked and sold as a slave himself, he is stoic about it. His royal demeanor has all the other slaves entranced, and so the captain uses Oroonoko as a tool to keep his prisoners under control.

When Oroonoko is sold, he ends up -- you guessed it -- in the same place as Imoira. He gets royal treatment while the other slaves are beaten, and he gets to actually marry his beloved. Still, he's stoic about being a slave, which I guess is easy if you're not being whipped or forced to work your hands to the bone. But when Imoira becomes pregnant, he pleads for their freedom: he does not want their child to be born a slave.

I won't tell you the rest of it, though this is already 2/3rds of the book, -- find out for yourself. Be warned that the last few pages contain graphic violence.

Overall, a very interesting text to read, with elements of 1001 night as well as war-stories and romance. Even

if the idea of reading something from 400 years ago is daunting to you, give this one a shot if any of the above sounds interesting to you. It's more accessible than you'd think.

For many more -- and more in-depth -- reviews of books mosey on over to my reading blog: [outsideofacat.wordpress.com](http://outsideofacat.wordpress.com) :)

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### **Fadoua says**

I only read Oroonoko.

In his novel "Sanshiro", Soseki introduced me to the English writer Aphra Behn. As I have never heard of Behn before, I looked her up. Wikipedia says about Behn:

*"the first English professional female literary writer."*

and about "Oroonoko"

*"Behn was a key dramatist in seventeenth century theater, and her prose work is critically acknowledged as important in the development of the English novel. She is perhaps best known to modern audiences for her short novel Oroonoko (1688), the tale of an enslaved African prince. It is notable for its exploration of slavery, race, and gender."*

Driven by curiosity, I decided that I should read one of her works.

Some notes:

+ I don't think that the author is speaking out against slavery, as many claim. She is obviously against the slavery of "noble" among the native but one cannot infer that she condemns the slavery in general.

+ However her attitude towards religion is refreshing. She describes the African tribes as superior in their morals to Europeans. She argue that the degradation of European morals is due to the fact that religion introduced sins and corrupted people.

+ The style is unusual. The author uses long sentences. One may think that the pace of storytelling is slow but, no, quite the opposite. Her long sentence includes many verbs, which gives the impression of fast actions. As I advance in my reading, I get used to the style. Moreover, the English is accessible, although the novel was written more than 400 years ago.

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### **?Kimari? says**

I first read Oroonoko for a high school literature class. I remembered it as a Romeo and Juliet-esque star-crossed lovers tale. I completely forgot about the dark and gruesome ending.

Oroonoko is regarded as the first English language novel to be published. Astonishingly, it was written by a woman, one who didn't use a male pseudonym to earn a living. Despite being riddled with stereotypes, the novel generally portrays slaves in a positive light and makes a case against slavery. That's pretty amazing when you recall that it was published in 1688!

“All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.”

— from *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf

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## El says

(I read this book as part of a reading project I have undertaken with some other nerdy friends in which we read *The Novel: A Biography* and some of the other texts referenced by Schmidt.)

Oh, Aphra Behn. A fascinating woman that no one knows that much about because who cares about women, especially in the 17th-century! Boring! Women don't *write*! And if they do, it's just "scribbling" (says Nathaniel Hawthorne), and they certainly don't get *paid* for it.

Well, Aphra Behn did get paid. Virginia Woolf said Aphra Behn was the first woman in history paid for her writing, which is pretty exciting. And for that reason alone I don't understand why we don't know more about her. Well, she's not Shakespeare, right? So probably not worth studying.

Luckily I went to a women's college and we *did* get to read Aphra Behn. That was my first experience with her, and I had the bestest professor for the occasion. I wish she was sitting on the couch beside me while I read this collection because, sadly, I forgot everything she told us and she was a hoot in lectures anyway so it would have just been fun having her here to giggle about the dirty things Behn may have implied.

Also, Behn was a spy. If that's not bad-ass, I don't know what is.

### **The Fair Jilt (1688):**

The story of a young woman, Miranda, who tries to seduce a man, and when that fails, she accuses him of rape. She hooks up with a prince, but blows her wad and is sad she has no more money. So she invites her sister to come live with her, totally mind-fucks her out of having any healthy relationship with other men, and, oh, steals a bunch of her money. As if Miranda wasn't fucked up enough, she took things to a whole new level (view spoiler)

Fine enough story, though sort of tedious at times. Interesting in that Behn wrote it as it was - based on a true story - but her audience didn't believe her because there was no Google in the 17th century. In the historical fiction context, makes me think of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*... except only 70-some pages long and not nearly as good.

### **Oroonoko (1688):**

Oroonoko is the grandson of an African king who falls in love with a general's daughter, Imoinda. The king also falls in love with Imoinda, which one can imagine leads to some complication. One thing leads to another, Imoinda is sold into slavery, but Oroonoko is told that she's dead, but then Oroonoko himself is

captured and put into slavery, and huzzah! They are reunited again.

But things still don't end happily.

I read this originally in college and remember thinking it was pretty great, if for no other reason that it was a good example of a 17th century female writer - a time when there were not many published women writers. But as an older reader I see it's not flawless (though I'm sure I realized it at the time too, but was maybe a bit more forgiving about it than I am now), and am reminded just how unenlightened people were 300-some years ago.

Overall, though, this is narrative prose, and it's not always terribly exciting or interesting to read. I can't say this is a flaw of Behn's since I've been reading other 16th and 17th-century writers recently and they're all relatively boring in their own ways.

#### **Love-Letters to a Gentleman (1696):**

I don't really understand what this is. Letters from Astrea to, presumably, a gentleman, Lycidas, but there's a whopping 8 letters and takes up just a few pages. It appears from the notes that this was from a larger posthumous collection, but were there more letters? Is this just a piece of something larger? God, I hate that. Give me the whole thing, or don't give me anything at all.

The notes also indicate that Lycidas may have been based on a real person with whom Behn allegedly ran around with, so maybe she's Astrea here, writing veiled letters as a "character". I don't know. This wasn't long enough to get a strong enough grasp on or for it to make any sort of impression.

#### **The Rover (1677):**

Another one I originally read in college, but my memory of it has been so fuzzy that it was good to revisit it now.

There's a lot happening in this play, but it's such fun to read. A woman is on a quest to find some lovin before her brother sends her to the nunnery (because that's what all single women had to do at one time in history), a man (the rover) falls in love with her, but a famous prostitute falls in love with *him* and doesn't handle the fact that he loves someone else very well. Some other stuff happens (believe it or not) but as far as I'm concerned it's not nearly as interesting to read about, let alone write about.

#### **The Widow Ranter, or the History of Bacon in Virginia (1689):**

A play. About bacon.

Not really. Bacon is a man, a real man, who was involved in Bacon's Rebellion which is not about the pork uprising. And Bacon's Rebellion is what this play is about.

Also, GADZOORS. There's a lot of that. Whatever that means. Gadzoors, indeed.

#### **Poems (various):**

There were really only a few poems, and they were fine. I'm not the biggest fan of poetry, and 17th-century poetry is not high on my list of favorite poetry, but it was fine anyway.

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### **Eleanor says**

Finally. I read seven other books during the time it took me to finish this one! Jesus. Anyway. I'll be writing a full review for The Classics Club soon, but just for now, it's worth noting: this book is super, super racist. It was written in 1688 or thereabouts, so that is sort of par for the course, but it's racist in some pretty spectacular ways--it's not "all black people are gross and bestial" so much as it is "This one African prince was so perfect and amazing, no one could figure out how he could have grown up like this, and then they realized that his tutor was European, which explains everything. Except for the fact that this amazing African prince also had completely European features, which only goes to show how amazing he really was." That kind of racist. The kind that makes you go "WHAT. SERIOUSLY."

I mean, Aphra Behn may have been the first woman in English literary history to earn her living by her pen, but she wasn't no saint, is all I'm saying.

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