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## APHRA BEHN'S *OROOKO*: CULTURAL DIALECTICS AND THE NOVEL

BY ODDVAR HOLMESLAND

Since the publication of *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave* in 1688, critics have been intrigued by its contradictoriness. Any attempt to classify the work as a romance, novel, or travel narrative, respectively, becomes reductive. Behn's narrative appears as an amalgam of these genres.<sup>1</sup> To what extent its romance features subjugate its realism, or vice versa, is a complex issue. A related question is how the respective modes interact so as to convey moral, political, or ideological attitudes on the part of the narrator or author.

This essay makes a case for seeing *Oroonoko* as reflecting the uneasy transition, in the late seventeenth century, from an aristocratic, romance-prone ideology towards a more rationalist, progressive age. The narrator reveals her contradictory position: she is a conservative, but with leanings towards the new world of mercantile expansionism. Though she apparently encourages liberty and enlightenment, she seems to rely on virtues valued by the traditional hierarchy for order and stability. Her dual position seeks its dialectical reconciliation in *Oroonoko*. The focus of this essay is the paradoxical implications of Behn's mediative effort. Thus in *Oroonoko*, she uses the black prince to figure a nobility that encompasses features of progressive individualism. From the same mediative perspective, she can be seen to superimpose romance and allegorical patterns on a realist form suggestive of novel, travel narrative, or both. There are, moreover, signs of a widening quest to reconcile a spiritual order with the corporeal world. With its religious allusions, her narrative conveys an ethical message to the new world. This response can be seen to anticipate a mode of cultural criticism also evident in later ages of transition, such as the nineteenth century. Though Behn's message is closely associated with romance chivalry and a feudalist ethos, its aim is to bridge ideological schisms. However, Behn's effort frequently reflects the ideological instability of her own position.

This approach to *Oroonoko* has to contend with much textual intricacy and ambiguity. Also, the fact that critics differ on how the realism relates to the romance features shows the difficulty of ascribing

a stable political and moral attitude to the narrator. A case in point is Behn's attitude towards issues such as slavery and the Other, embodied most prominently by the African protagonist. Maureen Duffy thus finds *Oroonoko* remarkable for showing "no taint of racism" regarding "people of other races and colours"; the Other is "not lesser but simply different," an attitude that calls for a realist method: "these differences she [Behn] chronicles with a typically seventeenth-century proto scientific curiosity and accuracy."<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Sussman, on the other hand, asserts that Behn's use of romance deflects any ideological or political critique of the hierarchical assumptions underlying colonialism and slavery: the narrator "sides with the status quo of slave culture," because she "consistently rechannels traces of the pain of a captive culture into romantic conventions. The context of slavery is never allowed to have disruptive power in the novel."<sup>3</sup> In short, the romanticization of the Other serves but to cement colonial dominance and deny the subject position of the colonial object. Jane Spencer ascribes a more mediatory role to the narrator: "As a character the narrator seems caught uneasily between admiration for her hero and allegiance to European civilization, but this means that she can present a picture of both sides."<sup>4</sup> However, Spencer does not specify whether the qualities the narrator admires in her hero are non-European ones. This ambiguity weakens Spencer's point, since the hero is much commended for virtues associated with the idealized European. Angeline Goreau more specifically argues that "it is, in fact, his savagery that saves him from what Aphra sees as the moral degeneracy of European society."<sup>5</sup> Yet his *noble savage* features are oddly consonant with noble qualities *naturalized* by a European aristocratic order.

Laura Brown employs different premises in reading *Oroonoko* as a critique of colonial and racial prejudice. Behn's method, she thinks, is to portray the black African within the familiar discourse of aristocratic romance. His wit, gallantry, and code of honor compare favorably with the betrayal of civilized values by the English. In presenting a civilized black among European barbarians, Behn allegedly inverts the dominant colonial ideology. Towards this effect, Brown reads the story about Oroonoko as a renarration of the fate of Charles I, whose conflict with Parliament culminated in the Civil War and his own execution. There certainly are signs of Behn's Tory Royalist sympathies in the text: the black prince "had heard of the late Civil Wars in England and the deplorable death of our great monarch, and would discourse of it with all the sense, and abhorrence of the injustice imaginable."<sup>6</sup> Charles and

Oroonoko, then, are made heroic martyrs alike, victims of new forces in English society associated with mercantile imperialism.<sup>7</sup>

As Brown sees it, however, Behn employs the women characters, including the narrator, to make possible “the superimposition of aristocratic and bourgeois systems.” Having but marginal status, the women are not contained by any fixed position or perspective. Thus they serve as inspirers of the hero’s exploits and corroborators of his romantic appeal, just as they are consumers of the Indians’ exotic pets, feathers, skins, furs, and the ornaments made from these, all synecdochic signs of the mercantile expansion of English economy which also included trade in slaves. To Brown, the “radical contemporaneity of issues of gender with those of romance and race” leads to recognition of a worthy human being. Female sympathy with the black slave involves a critique of white colonialism due to the sense of analogy between racial and gender superordination. Accordingly, Behn is seen to present an Other, “not as a projection of colonialist discourse, contained or incorporated by a dominant power, but as an historical force in his own right and his own body.”<sup>8</sup>

The narrator of *Oroonoko* does express sympathetic identification with the royal slave and outrage at his cruel treatment by the colonists. That this is partly the effect of the narrator’s mediatory function between aristocratic and bourgeois mythoi also seems supportable. Yet to infer that we are thereby presented with “the notion of a relatively autonomous native position” that has “implications of a critique of imperialism or of ideology critique in general” is to grant the narrator’s position too much stability.<sup>9</sup> As Ros Ballaster puts it, “a Utopian picture of gender and race symbolically marrying in the shape of white female narrator and black male hero in order to ‘deconstruct’ colonial discursive power may be attractive, but it is, like Behn’s own self-fashioning, only a consoling fiction.”<sup>10</sup> A central ambiguity emerges. On the one hand, the narrator’s sympathy with Oroonoko may seem to transcend ideological paradigms. On the other, her sympathetic creation reveals ideological fissures. Rather than meet the Other in the field of intersecting discourses, the Other largely seems *produced* by the mediating process. This incongruity serves to highlight the unstable perspective of the narrator. Thus “while it [*Oroonoko*] purports to be simple ‘unadorn’d’ biography,” says Ballaster, “it meditates obsessively upon the seductive power and the unstable status of fictional writing in relation to the simple dichotomy of truth and lie.”<sup>11</sup> The narrator’s stated intention in *Oroonoko* has to be considered in this light. She presents herself as a traveling investigator who comments on events with the authority of an

eyewitness.<sup>12</sup> And what she has not witnessed herself, she claims to have received from the reliable source of the hero himself. Behn is evidently much concerned to bring the many romantic events that take place in Africa and the West Indies down to the level of verisimilitude. Thus she pleads in a dedicatory epistle to Lord Maitland: "If there be anything that seems romantic, I beseech your Lordship to consider these countries do, in all things, so far differ from ours, that they produce inconceivable wonders; at least they appear so to us because new and strange" (*O*, 5-6).

To recognize the instability of the narrator's position in *Oroonoko* is also to acknowledge the complexity involved in her effort to create novelistic verisimilitude. Goreau, on the one hand, regards Behn as a realistic novelist writing in reaction against romance, despite "her concurrent repetition of the rejected convention." As for her lapses into romance, Goreau reminds us that "the world Aphra Behn was describing was only beginning to apply scientific criteria to the examination of evidence: the separation between the natural and supernatural, reality and magic, miracle and fact, had not yet entirely taken place, as it had by the time eighteenth-century novelists were writing."<sup>13</sup> To Goreau, then, Behn incipiently matches the convention of "formal realism" which Ian Watt was later to define as the distinguishing feature of the novel genre.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Behn's endeavor to give romance material the appearance of reality signals not only generic confusion, but an epistemological relativity bound up with older teleological conceptions of the world.<sup>15</sup> For instance, Behn's claim to veracity was not entirely new, but a device that writers of romance and allegory had used in the past. It was carried on to the early novel as a means of conveying moral significance or illustrating an idea of life. Verisimilitude would signal that the novel had something important to say about this world, rather than being a self-contained realm of mere fancy. However, the frame of reference would be an overarching value pattern as much as an empirical reality. Behn seems to embody such an ambiguous mediating position with regard to *Oroonoko*.

This mediating concern seems further to be bound up with a situation of ideological instability. For instance, the white narrator may move towards a utopian harmony with the black slave, combined with a critique of English colonial attitudes. Yet rather than base this critique on sympathetic identification with the Other's subject position, it may be triggered by Behn's conservative regret about a waning aristocratic ethos, strikingly noticeable in the dishonorable motives underlying some Englishmen's treatment of the slaves. By implication, the focus of

conflict shifts towards a painful ideological transition that concerns England more, perhaps, than the Other. In her mediatory position, the narrator thus transposes romance qualities to the contemporary world, implying a critique as well as a notion of what the contemporary world needs in order to be restored. Such incorporation of romance values into a verisimilar context makes her novelistic function dialectical rather than realistic, in Watt's sense of the term. Accordingly, a central concern of this essay is to examine how generic modes interact so as to convey the moral, political, or ideological attitudes of the narrator or author.

There are ample indices that the royal slave is a novelistic medium for Behn's utopian restoration of English culture. The wider context consists of three different cultures—the English, the Coramantien, and the native Surinam—which are compared to one another. In this way, the English are shown in their relations with non-European natives and with the African slave trade. Behn's norms for comparison are generally qualities bound up with the idea of a natural order, an order which has been disturbed during the English Revolution. Oroonoko is victimized by civilized brutality, against which he pits the honesty, honor, and loyalty nurtured in a seemingly more natural order. Behn recovers some of these qualities among the Surinam Indians who live in harmony with one another and nature. Although Oroonoko is not a noble savage, there is some justification for arguing, as Metzger does, that “he comes close to embodying Rousseau's ideal of what an early stage of human community may produce as against a decadent society governed by competitive self-interest.”<sup>16</sup> Behn, however, is not dealing with the antithesis between nature and civilization as such, but rather with the corruptions of a receding English civilization that appears more natural. Implicitly, such an order may, in fact, be less natural than *naturalized* by aristocratic discourse. The aristocratic ideology, according to Arnold Kettle, refers to a naturalized harmonious order “based on static property-relationships, exalting an unchanging, God-ordained hierarchy in Church and State.”<sup>17</sup> Such naturalized mythoi provide a level of compatibility between Surinam virtues and those of an English aristocratic order.<sup>18</sup> From a Marxist point of view, ideology (feudal or bourgeois) is definable as a structure of consciousness that naturalizes the world, allowing individuals and classes to believe that the economic and political arrangements of their society are natural. The dominant ideology provides people with conceptions of the value and meaning of life so “natural” as to defy questioning.<sup>19</sup> When Behn, therefore, writes to Lord Maitland “of a man [Oroonoko] gallant enough to merit your protection,” regretting that she herself “wanted power to preserve this

great man" (*O*, 5), one wonders if it is because, through sympathetic identification with the Other, she thinks the hierarchy of slavery basically wrong, because inherently unnatural, or unnatural only for the royal slave due to his noble breeding. In this unstable territory, there are suggestions that Behn's novelistic method of creating verisimilitude serves as a dialectical instrument of naturalization.

Writing to Lord Maitland of the gallantry and greatness of the royal slave, and of his "inglorious" (*O*, 5) end, Behn's elevated diction of romance ascribes qualities to him that make him seem the best breed of English nobility. The ethos of nobility, moreover, is reflected in romance literature, for "romance was the non-realistic, aristocratic literature of feudalism."<sup>20</sup> Its formal pattern, developed in twelfth-century France, would portray characters of the first rank, distinguished by their heroic courage and miraculous exploits, whose honorable conduct extended to the treatment of their opponents. Thus one of the many qualities to complement Oroonoko's "real greatness of soul, those refined notions of true honour, that absolute generosity," is "that softness that was capable of the highest passions of love and gallantry, whose objects were almost continually fighting men, or those mangled, or dead, who heard no sounds but those of war and groans" (*O*, 11). Oroonoko has much in common with the virtues the narrator admires in Lord Maitland, a man "teaching the world divine precepts, true notions of faith, and excellent morality . . . a generosity that gives a lustre to your nobility; that hospitality and greatness of mind that engages the world and that admirable conduct that so well instructs it." To Behn, the greatness of this Lord, who is an honorable generalist and will "hoard no one perfection," is nurtured by the cultural greatness of England: "to the glory of your nation be it spoken, it produces more considerable men, for all fine sense, wit, wisdom, breeding, and generosity (for the generality of the nobility) than all other nations can boast" (*O*, 4). By comparison, Oroonoko, though a native African, draws his greatness from the highest principles on which European noble culture rests: he has been taught "morals, language, and science" by a "French man of wit and learning," he "admired the Romans" and is endowed with the grace and integrity of someone whose "education had been in some European court" (*O*, 11). Oroonoko and Lord Maitland are given still more in common. Both are dispossessed, as it were, the one by being sold into slavery and the other, a Jacobite, by going into exile after the revolution of 1688.<sup>21</sup> In lamenting over her country's loss, Behn is also concerned with the high qualities that need to be restored to post-revolution England. Lord Maitland is seen to embody "such noble



principles of loyalty and religion this nation sighs for,” and to be worthy of “the veneration that the commonalty naturally pay their lords” (O, 4). On the basis of this evidence, the author of *Oroonoko* appears to idealize classical culture with its nurturing of general virtues, accomplishments, and learning in a higher balance. The English feudal hierarchy, moreover, seems to be valued as the natural order in which the veneration of such high qualities can be upheld. Behn even seems to regard it as the special responsibility of the highest class to be good models, as suggested by the moral sting she directs at its decadent members: “’Tis by such illustrious precedents as your Lordship the world can be bettered and refined,” she writes, precedents which “a great part of the lazy nobility shall with shame behold” (O, 4). England is thus seen to need Lord Maitland for reasons similar to those that inspired Coleridge’s faith in an endowed class (the clerisy), Carlyle’s proposal for an “organic Literary Class,” Ruskin’s notion of a paternal aristocracy, or Arnold’s idea of the civilizing minority—namely, to guide nineteenth-century Britain through industrialism and utilitarianism.<sup>22</sup>

There is a sense in which Behn precedes this tradition in cultural criticism. Coleridge, while anchored in the old order, attempts to accommodate the modern, progressive world. He thus envisages an interdependence between the “permanency” provided by “land-owners” and the “progressiveness, and personal freedom” represented by “the merchants, the manufacturers, free artizans, and the distributive class.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly anchored, Behn’s aristocratic outlook is not rigid or static in relation to certain aspects of the progressive forces that started to transform the feudal world in the seventeenth century. The rising bourgeoisie and their artists and thinkers, says Kettle, craved “freedom to trade, freedom to explore, freedom to investigate, freedom to invent, freedom to evolve an adequate philosophy.”<sup>24</sup> Behn appears to endorse Oroonoko’s rebellion against his king’s authority because he craves freedom to love. Her open-mindedness is noted by Janet Todd, who claims that Behn found the rule of Charles II “a kind of reign of love and liberation.”<sup>25</sup> Maureen Duffy, moreover, compares Behn’s position to that of the agnostic Duke of Buckingham, author of *Reason and Religion*, and his leanings towards “liberty of conscience.”<sup>26</sup> There is a liberal strain in Behn’s attitude that inclines her towards the progressive rationalism that threatened feudal absolutism in the seventeenth century. Yet at the same time, this enhances the instability of her novelistic position. In the proximity of the Age of Enlightenment, she voyages to the West Indies, conservatively biased, yet committed to rediscover the world through scientific, unprejudiced empiricism. She is



“curious to gather every circumstance of his [Oroonoko’s] life” in such a way that it will “come simply into the world, recommended by its own proper merits and natural intrigues” (*O*, 6). In Behn’s time, voyages undertaken to faraway places could signal a utopian desire to discover a freedom independent of feudal preordination. In prose literature, this period of ideological transition found expression in formal realism and the pre-novel. In a world “new and strange” (*O*, 6), conventional concepts would be questioned and reality approached from a defamiliarized perspective. Thus to Michael McKeon, imaginary voyages to exotic countries often presented the “progressive fantasy of status hierarchy obliterated by the universal rule of industrious virtue.”<sup>27</sup>

Belief in civilization and individual opportunity could also induce some reinterpretation of non-European natives as having the potential for civilized greatness, not just barbarism and slavery. This, then, may be one reason why the author of *Oroonoko* chooses an African for her hero. She portrays a culturally improved specimen, pleased to find that he has “nothing of barbarity in his nature” (*O*, 11). Due to “the perfections of his mind,” “his discourse was admirable upon almost any subject, and whoever had heard him speak would have been convinced of their errors, that all fine wit is confined to the white men, especially to those of Christendom” (*O*, 12). In Surinam, Imoinda, now Clemene, has similarly won every white man’s admiration: they all sigh for her, including Trefry, her slave-master, who declares “that all the white beauties he had seen never charmed him so absolutely as this fine creature had done” (*O*, 41). He honors her too much to make her yield to his power over her. So when her identity is revealed, Trefry respectfully steps aside and approves Oroonoko and Imoinda’s reunion. In this New World, the two lovers enjoy a liberality that contrasts with the bigoted customs of Coramantien. Trefry stands as the potential representative of an enlightened liberal humanism in Europe.

This notion of a new order contains the idea of rational and moral progress. Goreau thus finds justification for arguing that “slavery . . . as Aphra saw it, was a matter of power. It had nothing to do with natural superiority, Christianity, or any of the other justifications that were commonly assumed at the time.” Behn’s egalitarianism allegedly combines with an enlightened Christianity into the view that slavery “was unworthy of a society that claimed to be based on Christian ideals,” which, Goreau suggests, “was quite a radical position to put forth when the English had just begun to enjoy the profits of the slave trade and had not even yet questioned its inhumanity.”<sup>28</sup> Behn sets out to give a truthful account of an African who has progressed far beyond the

ignorant state of nature by his capacity for acquiring the best of western learning. To Duffy, "Behn's concept of a hierarchy, which is an entirely fluid structure allowing men to move either up or down from the position of their birth by virtue of intelligence, courage, charm and so on, also allows her to be racially egalitarian."<sup>29</sup>

*Oroonoko* could be termed a pre-novel, superimposing an aristocratic order on progressive ideas of social mobility, individual experience, and the exploration of a truer order of the world. However, the question remains to what extent such progressive notions would include racial egalitarianism. Seeing *Oroonoko* as the first English novel, Firdous Azim finds the genre to be bound up with genealogical imperialism. Her starting point is the realist position, beginning with Descartes and Locke, that truth can be discovered by the individual through the senses. She suggests that the search for origins often centers on "first-person narratives describing far-off places," which nevertheless "remain rooted within the bounds of their own society, while desiring to flee and free themselves of social constraints." The perspective of the narrating subject becomes the dominant, "based on the forceful eradication and obliteration of the Other."<sup>30</sup> Hence Behn's progressive commitment will deny Oroonoko his subject position. Instead of exploring the "new and strange" in the expectation of finding it different, Behn will adorn the world with European signifiers. Along with the interests of an expanding colonial power, Oroonoko will be made less different, more comprehensible, more assimilable, and a less potentially disruptive element.<sup>31</sup>

In Azim's version, the novel form of *Oroonoko* reflects a bourgeois ideology that becomes dominant. Individualism is seen to conquer feudal values linked to a naturalized hierarchical order. Correspondingly, the royal slave is made an agent of mercantile capitalism: "Suitably Europeanised, speaking both French and English . . . and even identifying with European commercial interests, Oroonoko is the prototype of the colonised subject, the Third World bourgeoisie of modern times, whose commercial, economic and political welfare are dependent on the fortunes of international finance."<sup>32</sup> Yet even if Behn imbues him with progressive features, there is no justification for claiming that they are dominant. Oroonoko can certainly not be fully understood apart from the aristocratic ideology that informs his character. He is very much a figure of romance and feudalism learning to adapt to the modern world. Azim commits the same oversimplification as Ian Watt, who delimits the novel in terms of the formal realism it receives from the dominance of the empirically-minded bourgeoisie in the early eighteenth century. Watt's position provokes McKeon's question of why

romance continues to suffuse the works Watt defines as novels, and indeed the period itself. The difficulty of drawing a clear line between novel and romance, moreover, has its corollary in the categorical instability of social classes in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. McKeon wonders how it can be documented that the middle class of this period was dominant and distinguishable “—by contemporaries and in reality—from the traditional social categories of the aristocracy and gentry, especially as the nobility of early modern England was itself transformed by cultural attitudes and material activities that bear a clear relation to the new ‘individualism.’” For instance, he says, “what, indeed, are we to make, in this context, of the familiar type of middle-class upstart whose middle-class identity is defined by nothing so much as a self-negating impulse, a will to be assimilated into the aristocracy?” On the other hand, he continues, “what are we to make of the unsettling argument that middle-class individualism originated not in eighteenth—but in thirteenth-century England?”<sup>33</sup> One possible implication is that progressive ideology is dialectically suffused with centuries-old feudal modes of signifying the world.

As an example, the early novel’s individualist quest for truth and origins, expressed in first-person accounts of far-off places, is partly the legacy of an old travel-narrative genre. Utopian travel writing, as traced to the Renaissance humanist Sir Thomas More, typically represents an ideal community in a distant exotic country reached by a venturesome traveler, a community freer and truer to nature because isolated from European civilization. The narrator of *Oroonoko* discovers such simple harmony among the Surinam Indians:

And these people represented to me an absolute idea of the first state of innocence, before Man knew how to sin, and ’tis most evident and plain that simple Nature is the most harmless, inoffensive, and virtuous mistress. ’Tis she alone, if she were permitted, that better instructs the world than all the inventions of Man. Religion would here but destroy that tranquillity they possess by ignorance, and laws would but teach ’em to know offence, of which now they have no notion. (*O*, 8)

The passage draws on Montaigne’s essay “Of Cannibals” (first translated by John Florio into English in 1603) while looking forward to the writings of Rousseau. A more specific source of influence on *Oroonoko* seems to be Sir Walter Raleigh’s *Discovery of Guiana* (1596), which recounts his explorations of a kingdom near the Oronoco river. Yet in his description of Guiana, his search for a more natural order is mastered by

the motive of conquest, expressed in the lofty and elaborate language of chivalric romance: "the shining glory of this conquest will eclipse all those so far extended beams of the Spanish nation." Chivalric honor and imperial glory come together: "For whatsoever prince shall possess it, shall be greatest." Ultimately, possession of the colony is associated with a God-ordained honor, reflecting an aristocratic hierarchical conception: "I trust in God, this being true, will suffice, and that he which is King of all Kings and Lord of Lords, will put it into her heart which is Lady of Ladies to possess it."<sup>34</sup> The narrator of *Oroonoko* seems to share this ideological attitude when she laments what "his late Majesty of sacred memory" (*O*, 47) had "lost by losing that part of America" to the Dutch (*O*, 57).

In the light of this, the novelistic narrator of *Oroonoko* is not definable as the imposer of a progressive ethos over an aristocratic one, or vice versa. Rather, her endeavor to "gather every circumstance" of a world that is "new and strange" is inscribed with partly contradictory, partly intersecting discourses (*O*, 6). Hence her role as objective eyewitness reveals epistemological fissures, subject to the categorical instability of an age of transition. The verisimilitude of *Oroonoko* is not premised on the rejection of romance convention in all its aspects. Correspondingly, the narrator seems attracted to aspects of progressive ideology, but with an aristocratic bias. In effect, the protagonist embodies the narrator's way of mediating between the best of the aristocratic and progressive worlds, thus fashioning a model for the modern age. At the same time, he is the embodiment of antithetical qualities. His position in relation to the issues of colonialism and slavery provides an apt example. On the one hand, he sympathizes, like the narrator, with Charles Stuart. An emperor himself, Caesar is imbued with royalist attitudes that make him seem the conniving representative of an imperialist ideology. Fittingly enough, the Coramantien attitude is to "pay a most absolute resignation to the monarch" (*O*, 14). On the other hand, Caesar himself falls victim to the colonizing policy. On behalf of himself and his fellow Coramantien slaves, he denounces this as the greatest infamy. Yet it is not evident that his, or the narrator's, indignation is disruptive of more basic ideological presuppositions. Thus Caesar may speak to his fellow slaves of "the miseries and ignominies of slavery, counting up all their toils and sufferings under such loads, burdens, and drudgeries as were fitter for beasts than men, senseless brutes than human souls" (*O*, 57), but he nevertheless offers to sell the colonists a large quantity of slaves in return for the release of himself and his wife

(*O*, 44). And when some of the slaves refuse to join his risky insurrection to gain freedom, he denounces them to be “by nature slaves” (*O*, 62).

Yet his attitude here is only contradictory if one separates it from the signifying context of aristocratic ideology. He trades slaves in keeping with a courtly Coramantien tradition (*O*, 33). Such a practice is sanctioned by a naturalized hierarchical order. Moreover, the Coramantien code of honor only allows Oroonoko to sell men captured in battle, which creates a link with the chivalric warrior tradition of romance.<sup>35</sup> Oroonoko thus denounces the colonists for keeping himself and his tribesmen as slaves on the wrong premises—through trickery motivated by mere profit:

Have they vanquished us nobly in fight? Have they won us in honourable battle? And are we by the chance of war become their slaves? This would not anger a noble heart, this would not animate a soldier's soul; no, but we are bought and sold like apes or monkeys. (*O*, 58)

Slavery vindicated by a chivalric code of honor is set against the ignominy of profit being made the sole principle of trade and conquest. As a mediating figure, however, Oroonoko does not embody an absolute aristocratic denial of the progressive world of exchange value, as expressed, according to McKeon, in “the conservative utopia of an aristocracy authorized by nature itself, with luxury and the lust for money nowhere to be found.”<sup>36</sup> The Coramantien, in fact, do not keep themselves immune from compromises with mercantile interest. The narrator explains that “all [the captives] they took in battle were sold as slaves; at least, those common men who could not ransom themselves. Of these slaves so taken, the general only has all the profit and of these generals, our captains and masters of ships buy all their freights” (*O*, 10). In *Oroonoko*, as in Raleigh's travel account, imperial or colonial exploitation seems condonable because it is carried out in the name of the crown, not instigated by profit-hungry self-seekers. In this way, it is more easily linked to notions of chivalric exploit. This may, of course, be an apt excuse for less honorable motives. Nevertheless, it can serve to exemplify the way in which the English nobility has always survived through compromises with commercial interest.<sup>37</sup> Thus it is not the colonial enterprise as such that the narrator of *Oroonoko* defies, but signs of it being dominated by extortive motives. So she regrets that, in the absence of the king's highest representative in Surinam, power is now in the hands of a cynical usurper such as Deputy-Governor Byam, who corrupts the presumed will of a benevolent king (*O*, 66). Accord-

ingly, the English sea captain's cynical treachery and his treatment of his human commodities on board the slave ship signal Behn's indignation, as does her account of her countrymen's brutality towards the royal slave after he has been captured as a runaway.

Oroonoko's incongruous role allows for moral indictment, but it defuses disruptive ideological attacks on the naturalized hierarchical order that may be said to exonerate slavery. This is one important implication of the book's oxymoronic title *The Royal Slave*. Behn's main criticism is rather aimed at breaches of the supposedly natural code of honor, acts that foreground exchange value so as to corrupt the noble spirit associated with the top social rank. His conservative bias notwithstanding, Oroonoko also embodies an enlightened challenge to feudal naturalization, an independence of mind that relates him to European rationalism. Behn's protagonist is not a noble savage, but a prince educated through contact with European merchants, who, though a heathen, shares his creator's perspicacity in pointing out breaches of "the laws of God or man" (O, 66). His freethinking skepticism is shared by the narrator, who values the Surinam Indians for their natural simplicity, but recognizes that theirs is an inviable position in the real world: "it were not difficult to establish any unknown or extravagant religion among them, and to impose any notions or fictions upon 'em" (O, 54). Their innocence has been nurtured in a static recess, "and where there is no novelty, there can be no curiosity" (O, 8). In contrast, the narrator is "curious" to map the "new and strange," as well as to take an enlightened look at her own culture. The Indians' credulity, for instance, the fact that they know of no vice or cunning, finds a certain parallel in the aristocratically bred Oroonoko, who once believed a man upon his word. Thus he trusted the English sea captain's honor as though it were his own, and fell easy victim to the captain's cynical duplicity. Oroonoko at first lacks circumspection, skepticism, and knowledge about the real world. Through his experiences of the colonizers, however, he is divested of his naïveté. As a mobile adventuress herself, the narrator seems to trace a progressive development in her protagonist.

Yet his progressive skepticism is not acquired through disillusioned defiance of aristocratic romance. A dialectic is at work throughout the narrative to the effect that his romantic ideals empower his independence of mind. Thus it is his struggle to achieve glory and heavenly love that awakens him to the intolerability of his grandfather's use of authority. So when the king of Coramantien asserts his symbolic claim to Imoinda by sending her the royal veil, Oroonoko disobeys him and risks



his own life and that of his helpers in attempting to free his beloved from the king's seraglio. And having been told that the king had been too frail to consummate his conquest, Oroonoko ravishes Imoinda. His self-justification is the divine nature of their love. In order to achieve this sublime union, he entraps the king in the system of power and privilege over which he presides. According to custom, Imoinda's loss of her virginity to another man makes the king's possession of her unthinkable. There is a parallel between parts one and two of the narrative, between Oroonoko's rebellion against unjust royal authority in Coramantien and his struggle for liberty against the colonial regime in Surinam leading to his instigation of a slave rebellion. In the colonial context, he has to struggle to win the liberty denied him because he is black and repressed. His determination to oppose authority relates him to the progressive forces that transformed the feudal world. On the one hand, in McKeon's phrase, "Oroonoko is . . . able to represent the condition of the new man, who, passively transported from the Old World to the New, shows that he embodies the best principles of progressive ideology more successfully than most of his fellow moderns."<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that he craves freedom in order to achieve a stellar union with his sublime Imoinda. Their love is seen as the celestial match of "the beautiful black Venus to our young Mars" (*O*, 12). Such freedom requires not only physical release from captivity, but ideological rehabilitation to the glory of his former rank. The proper context for divine romantic love seems to be the order in which noble birth signifies a noble spirit. From this perspective, thoughts of liberty become all-important to Oroonoko when he learns that his wife is with child, "knowing he was the last of his great race" (*O*, 44).

On the one hand, Oroonoko's progressive individualism makes him a rebel against feudal authority. On the other, he carries with him a feudal bias that gives direction to his antagonism against corrupted standards in the colonial world. Yet the feudal legacy works on him in paradoxical ways. In order to be able to take action in the New World, for instance, he needs to conquer the anti-individualist, idealizing tradition of romance. He therefore "accused himself for having suffered slavery so long. Yet he charged that weakness on love alone, who was capable of making him neglect even glory itself, and for which now he reproaches himself every moment of the day" (*O*, 46). This effect of romantic love accords with the function Kettle ascribes to aristocratic romantic literature. Its underlying purpose, he suggests, was not to make people face reality or help them see where constructive changes were needed, but to transport them to a pseudo-world filled with grandeur and



extravagance, delight mixed with horror, and so “provide sensation for sensation’s sake.”<sup>39</sup> With its flight into unreality, romance was unlikely to undermine the feudal order and the status quo of power relations. As a slave in the New World, the status quo of Coramantien can only be retained as a fictitious state; this is suggested by the renaming of Oroonoko as Caesar, mock emperor of his own slavery. Faced with this ironic version of romance unreality, Caesar has to rely on his individual integrity and accommodate to reality. He translates otherworldly chivalric ideals into a personal code of honor and fortitude, pitting it against the duplicity of the colonial society. This again indicates his function as a dialectical figure between the old order and the new. When trying to foment a slave rebellion, he insists that “freedom and glorious liberty” imply “all the acts of virtue, compassion, charity, love, justice, and reason” (*O*, 59).<sup>40</sup> Despite his feudalist proclivity towards the sublime, he embodies a chivalric code that corresponds with the individualized terms of Christian virtue. In this way, he becomes a mediating figure between feudal romance and the modern world of mercantile materialism. As a model of Christian morality, moreover, he serves the narrator’s critique of the English. Thus she speaks of “ill morals . . . only practised in Christian countries where they prefer the bare name of religion and, without virtue or morality, think that’s sufficient” (*O*, 14).

In order to enhance the moral effect of *Oroonoko*, Behn infuses the romance with religious allegory. Thus in Coramantien, under siege by an invincible foe, Prince Oroonoko is at first paralyzed with grief over his loss of Imoinda. He lies as though “buried for two days,” while his army is in full confusion and disintegration. At the critical moment, however, he is mystically resurrected and leaps into battle in *deus ex machina* fashion: “he appeared like some divine power descended to save his country from destruction.” This “inspired all the rest with new courage and new order.” It is the new order instigated by a Christ-like figure, on whom his men have put “all things that might make him shine with most splendour.” Prince Oroonoko’s qualities draw on a combination of elements from romance and allegory. He gloriously triumphs over the enemy, but with a degree of chivalry and compassion equal to that of his bravery. Thus his most dangerous opponent “Jamoan afterwards became very dear to him, being a man very gallant, and of excellent graces, and fine parts” (*O*, 31). The new order embodied by Oroonoko is one that pays tribute to “the highest passions of love and gallantry,” whose objects are often “those mangled, or dead” (*O*, 11). His allegorical role is to embody a light for mankind. Like Christ, he is brought down from his great height to the lowest station in life—that of

captivity: "his misfortune was to fall in an obscure world" (*O*, 40) that fails to recognize his true worth. After leading an unsuccessful slave rebellion, he is promised fair dealings, but is instead betrayed, whipped, and humiliated. It is a world in which only the spirit is free to devise liberation and union. His final torture and dismemberment bear a resemblance to the crucifixion of Christ after his betrayal. With biblical overtones, Oroonoko stands "fixed like a rock" (*O*, 72) before his victimizers. Surveying the destructive scene and the reversals of Oroonoko's life, the narrator also holds on to this image. Her hope is, she says in the closing line, that "the reputation of my pen is considerable enough to make his glorious name to survive to all ages, with that of the brave, the beautiful, and the constant Imoinda" (*O*, 73). Behn models her black prince with allusions to an eternal figure to whom men may look for hope and guidance when the world threatens to conceal meaning.<sup>41</sup> From the allegorical point of view, this meaning derives from the way in which Oroonoko, like Christ, finally gives his life because he demands freedom to fulfil his potential for love. Just as Oroonoko is set off against the Coramantien king's formal authority, so he challenges the power wielded by the despiritualized opportunism of the European slave traders and colonists. The latter live in breach of the fact that, as Oroonoko says, "honor was the first principle in nature that was to be obeyed" (*O*, 58-59).

With its biblical allusions, *Oroonoko* conveys an ethical message applicable to the real world of conflict and transition. Notably, it works as an appeal to the individual human conscience rather than by forwarding a subversive ideological or political case. On these terms, *Oroonoko* provides an inchoate example of a long tradition in British social criticism. In the nineteenth century, for instance, Ruskin, as well as Carlyle, criticized the new world of "Laissez-faire, and Every man for himself."<sup>42</sup> They saw more natural liberty in the principles of the feudal order, in which the classes were bound together by "noble reverence, that is to say, reasonable and loving."<sup>43</sup> This was their alternative to the ideological subversion orchestrated through the French Revolution. Yet rather than advocate the political regression to a feudal regime, they can be seen as more realistically concerned with making its idea of a natural order held together by "reverence" the nexus in the progressive world. Similarly, Dickens, a more radical reformer, offers no revolutionary solution to the "Condition of England" question. In *Hard Times*, the harshest of his works, his message is an appeal of love to the individual human conscience, uttered by the dying, sanctified Stephen Blackpool.<sup>44</sup> Rather than envisaging a society perfected through political reform,

these social critics invest their hope in the potential for a natural human order, of which capitalism is the main enemy. Their function is one of mediation rather than revolt, as they attempt to improve the world by spiritualizing it. Correspondingly, *Oroonoko* is brought from his high kingdom down to the world of human injustice and oppression where he has to struggle, and even die, for what is most precious to him. This signals a materiality injected with spiritualized individual effort and purpose. It seems to be Behn's way of redeeming a nascent progressive ideology.

Nevertheless, modern civilization in *Oroonoko* remains largely separated from spirituality. The hero is, after all, more like a paradigm than an embodiment of the high potential of a human order. His impact is mainly to reveal the shortcomings of the contemporary world. This finally leaves an unreconciled gap between the allegorico-romance pattern and the life that is Behn's novelistic concern. Kettle suggests a relevant way of schematizing this incongruity. Most novelists, he finds, generally begin with a bias towards either "life" or "pattern." The former will try to convey a vivid sense of lived reality and so seek to make a pattern (interpretation of life's meaning, purpose, or moral truth) emerge out of it; the latter begin with a pattern that seems to them valid and try to inject life into it. Kettle relates these general tendencies to a line developing on the one hand from the journalism and pamphleteering of Thomas Nashe and Daniel Defoe, and on the other hand from the parables of the Bible, the Morality plays of the Middle Ages, and the sermons people listened to on a Sunday.<sup>45</sup> Behn's realistic starting point can be ascribed to the former, whereas she partly depends on the allegorico-romance pattern to illustrate an idea about life. From the novelistic perspective, however, these two levels of *Oroonoko* are never verisimilarly reconciled. The hero remains a rather abstract and super-human creation.

Behn's realistic method consequently bears on a quest for a spiritualized reality. The reader follows the narrator's strategy of trying to make her hero verisimilar despite his appearance of being a god. It is a quest comparable to that of the persona narrator in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. There we share Christian's limited perspective as he stumbles and struggles on his earthly way, trying to interpret events in terms of a manifest divine meaning.<sup>46</sup> In the more secularized context of *Oroonoko*, the narrator also attempts to mediate between human materiality and spiritual significance. This ties in with McKeon's argument that an important function of realism in the early novel is to "reformulate the problem of mediation for a world in which spirituality has ceased to represent another realm to which human materiality has only difficult

and gratuitous access.”<sup>47</sup> Hence literary realism is not just the instrument of authenticity. In *Robinson Crusoe*, for instance, the protagonist’s method of exploration is empirical, but it is extended to finding manifest signs of a providential meaning in the world. With this dual objective, the protagonist of *Robinson Crusoe*, like that of *Oroonoko*, travels to a faraway place near the Oronoco river to find out more about a reality that is “new and strange.” The novel thus becomes a locus for dialectically accommodating a transcendent universal order to reality. It seeks, in other words, to reconcile Aristotle’s distinction between the respective tasks of the historian and the poet, since the former’s function is to “report things that have happened” and express “the particular fact,” whereas the latter aims for the “probable” and “universal.”<sup>48</sup> In *Oroonoko*, Behn admittedly places herself on the side of the historian when she proclaims that she will render “the history of this royal slave” rather than “entertain my reader with the adventures of a feigned hero, whose life and fortunes fancy may manage at the poet’s pleasure” (*O*, 6). Yet by her historical faithfulness, she also seeks spirituality in a verisimilar context.

Such truth-telling, however, is complicated by the unstable discourses to which the narrator is subject. Metzger attributes this problem to a generic uncertainty in a period of literary transition. Behn, she suggests, “imposes the novelist’s point of view on romance material at a time when a clear distinction between the two narrative forms was barely beginning to emerge.”<sup>49</sup> Beverle Houston similarly finds a narrator “trying to keep control of the fantasy through realism and other interventions, trying in vain to keep the lid on the excess into which the text is constantly erupting.”<sup>50</sup> Yet the generic ambiguity combines with an epistemological impasse. In effect, the protagonist is conceived as having antithetical qualities: he is a humanized god, a Europeanized African, and a progressive feudalist. The Other, that is, becomes distinguishable as neither the one nor the other, but as a dialectical cultural hybrid. Behn’s fascination with primitivism and the noble savage provides a good example of this. On the one hand, it bears on the vision of a progressive utopia attainable by merit. On the other, as McKeon suggests, “the imaginary voyages of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries often combine a recognizably progressive critique of contemporary social stratification with a nuance of conservative doubt concerning the practicality of attaining utopias through the exercise of industrious virtue.”<sup>51</sup> To this can be added a certain pastoral regret, for, says James Sambrook, “as early as the sixteenth century . . . men had mourned the loss of an innocent world which was America before the first arrival of Europeans.”<sup>52</sup> Disillusionment with European

civilization would instigate a search, not only for a virtuous natural order, but also for the corresponding “conservative utopia of an aristocracy authorized by nature itself.”<sup>53</sup> Paradoxically, Behn’s search for origins and authenticity, and her wish to verify “anything that seems Romantic,” tend to invoke other romances (*O*, 5). She construes a figure of greatness that draws on progressive as well as conservative ideals.

In this way, Behn projects the categorical instability of her age into *Oroonoko*. Her narrative reveals the fissures to which her conception of verisimilitude is vulnerable. Towards the end of the story, she is confronted with the uncertain terms of reality. Her underlying skepticism about her hero is signaled when she colludes with the English to spy on him to find out if he is planning an uprising. This, however, does not have to mean that she finally loses sympathy for him or disengages herself from the cause of the Other. Her reason for wanting to prevent an uprising may not be too different from that of the slaves who refuse to join their leader because they fear for the life and wellbeing of their wives and children (*O*, 58). Nevertheless, her spying on him does suggest an uncertainty about who he really is, and consequently a fear of what he may be up to. Another circumstance to this effect is his killing of Imoinda. Despite the narrator’s consideration of it as “a deed that (however horrid it at first appeared to us all) when we had heard his reasons, we thought it brave and just” (*O*, 67), the killing does inject a note of uncertainty into the narrator’s assurance that there is nothing barbaric in his nature.<sup>54</sup> The accompanying category of the noble savage cannot help being called into question as well:

About this time we were in many mortal fears about some disputes the English had with the Indians, so that we could scarce trust ourselves without great numbers to go to any Indian towns or place where they abode, for fear they should fall upon us, as they did immediately after my coming away, and that it was in the possession of the Dutch, who used ’em not so civilly as the English, so that they cut in pieces all they could take, getting into houses and hanging up the mother and all her children about her; and cut a footman I left behind me all in joints, and nailed him to trees. (*O*, 52)

On the other hand, the torture and dismemberment of the black prince invite suspicion that a savage is lurking in the apparently civilized white man’s breast. The latter implication might even serve as an excuse for Oroonoko’s bloody act, and reinforce the sense that a seemingly noble character has been driven to desperation by callous colonizers who regard him as less than human.

Nevertheless, the ambiguity has a destabilizing impact on the basis for a progressive or conservative utopia, respectively.<sup>55</sup> On this note of uncertainty, *Oroonoko* ends. With the narrator absent from the savage scenes, she is able to dissociate herself from any political or ideological commitment.<sup>56</sup> She only renders the final events as they have been described to her by others, though with expressions of horror and grief. As the story closes, however, she lingers on the royal slave's greatness. The horror does not lessen her wish to canonize him. She clings to the image of his glory as if to mitigate the unstable terms of reality.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thus Lore Metzger finds it "a heterogeneous blend of realism and romance, a tale of fabulous adventures anchored in vivid social particularities, told by a charmingly intrusive narrator" ("Introduction" to Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko: or, The Royal Slave* [London: Norton, 1973], xv).

<sup>2</sup> Maureen Duffy, "Introduction" to Behn's *Oroonoko and Other Stories* (London: Methuen, 1986), 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Sussman, "The Other Problem with Women: Reproduction and Slave Culture in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," in *Rereading Aphra Behn: History, Theory, and Criticism*, ed. Heidi Hutner (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1993), 229.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 51.

<sup>5</sup> Angeline Goreau, *Reconstructing Aphra Behn: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), 59.

<sup>6</sup> Behn, *Oroonoko: or, The Royal Slave*, in *Oroonoko and Other Writings*, ed. Paul Salzman (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 11. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text and abbreviated *O*.

<sup>7</sup> Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), 57-58. Janet Todd states that Behn was also a passionate supporter of Charles II, whose reign was to her "free from commerce, forming in a society that has moved far from the golden age the nearest possible image of the ideal of selflessness and ease," as opposed to "the commercial classes and the parliamentary Whigs who, she felt, put a price on everything and saw politics simply as opportunism, an extension of commerce and a chance to exploit selfish interests" (*The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1660-1800* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1989], 72).

<sup>8</sup> Brown, 48-49 ("the superimposition of," "radical contemporaneity of"), 63 ("not as a projection").

<sup>9</sup> Brown, 63.

<sup>10</sup> Ros Ballaster, "New Hystericism: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*: The Body, the Text and the Feminist Critic," in *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories of Texts*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992), 293.

<sup>11</sup> Ballaster, 288. Ballaster's skepticism subscribes to a new historicist critical approach: "new historicism, in the wake of the post-structuralist 'undoing' of authorial intention, appears to succeed in resituating the author as a category of investigation in



literary criticism, without positing him or her as the sole and originary source of the text's meaning. Stephen Greenblatt reads both authors and 'characters' of the Renaissance period as 'self-fashioners,' presenting both as the sites for the intersection and articulation of multiple social codes" (286).

<sup>12</sup> Behn testifies to the autobiographical authenticity of what is related (*O*, 5).

<sup>13</sup> Goreau, 283.

<sup>14</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957; London: The Hogarth Press, 1987), 32.

<sup>15</sup> See Watt on the transition from "belief in the reality of universals" towards "belief in the individual apprehension of reality through the senses" (14).

<sup>16</sup> Metzger, xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Arnold Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: Hutchinson, 1967), 1:32.

<sup>18</sup> "Naturalization" thus mediates between the opposites Laura Brown sees: "The notion of natural innocence, which civilization and laws can only destroy, is obviously incompatible with the hierarchical aristocratic ideology of heroic form" (42).

<sup>19</sup> See Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1976), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Kettle, 29.

<sup>21</sup> See Salzman's note 3 (*O*, 269). Alluding to this, Behn writes to Lord Maitland that "the fruitfulness of your virtues sufficiently make amends for the barrenness of your soil" (*O*, 4).

<sup>22</sup> See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, 3rd ed. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1987), 63, 85, 146, 239. These attitudes are partly tributes to the ancient premise that "Nature is essentially complete and unchanging"—an assumption, says Watt, that "continued to be expressed until the nineteenth century" (14).

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, ed. John Colmer, vol. 10 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 16 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), 42.

<sup>24</sup> Kettle, 32.

<sup>25</sup> Todd, 72.

<sup>26</sup> Duffy, *The Passionate Shepherdess: Aphra Behn 1640-89* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), 268.

<sup>27</sup> Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987), 249.

<sup>28</sup> Goreau, 57.

<sup>29</sup> Duffy, *The Passionate Shepherdess*, 269.

<sup>30</sup> Firdous Azim, *The Colonial Rise of the Novel* (London: Routledge, 1993), 35 ("first-person narratives," "remain rooted within"), 37 ("based on").

<sup>31</sup> Azim's Marxist-inspired approach also has much in common with new historicist concerns. With relevance to Azim's investigation of a bourgeois narrative position which becomes homogeneous only by negating the Other, Stephen Greenblatt suggests that "self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This threatening Other—heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor, Antichrist—must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* [Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980], 9). Hayden White is similarly concerned with the ways in which colonial discourse attempts to contain the Other on the part of a dominant culture ("The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978], 183-96). Yet Laura Brown's different



new historicist reading is equally interesting for the present essay: "Productive and important as it has been for . . . critics of colonialism, the category of the 'other' seems nevertheless to have stymied systematically the possibility of a dialectical critique of colonial culture. It forecloses an approach that works through alterity to the mutual interaction between positions of oppression" (32).

<sup>32</sup> Azim, 50.

<sup>33</sup> McKeon, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Sir Walter Raleigh, *Discovery of Guiana* (1596), in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 6th ed., 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 1993), 1:1028 ("the shining glory"), 1030 ("For whatsoever prince," "I trust in God").

<sup>35</sup> Katharine M. Rogers points out that "Oroonoko acts as a traditional African king when he sells his prisoners of war as slaves. That the involvement of Europeans in the slave trade greatly increased its destructiveness is obvious now, but could not have been to Africans in his time. It was assumed that the conqueror had proven himself a better man than the conquered and therefore had the right to dispose of their lives as he chose—to sacrifice them to his ancestors, to use their labor in his own country, or to sell them overseas" ("Fact and Fiction in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Studies in the Novel* 20.1 [1988]: 8).

<sup>36</sup> McKeon, 249.

<sup>37</sup> Geoffrey Best makes this point in *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-75* (London: Fontana Press, 1971), 265.

<sup>38</sup> McKeon, 250-51.

<sup>39</sup> Kettle, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Sussman dwells on the power of romantic love to make Oroonoko acquiesce in slavery, thus threatening his power of action as well as his male glory and self-respect. Since the woman is the agent of this degrading state, his rebellion against the slave-masters is complemented by his making her an object of possession, which finally involves killing her to prove his male dominion over her. To Sussman, this implies fighting to regain "the territory of his heart," since "love and slavery take sides against self and glory" (223-24).

<sup>41</sup> Sussman views the narrator's closing comment as a way to "remove all traces of slavery from the lovers and to channel the events into the conventional form of a romance." The effect, she suggests, is but to "move [the narrator's] reader to sentimental response," and thus allow "Oroonoko and Imoinda to survive as a couple, possessing only the attributes of a moving relation" (229). Sussman is partially right, yet in trivializing their relation in this way, she ignores its biblical implications for the narrator, as well as the narrator's ongoing attempts to mediate between a level of allegory/romance and reality. From the perspective of her mediation, Oroonoko does not, in killing Imoinda, finally make a "choice between love and honor," "thereby removing the impediment to honorable rebellion," as William C. Spengemann also argues ("The Earliest American Novel: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 38.4 [1984]: 398, 403). This interpretation is counteracted by the prince's prostrate grief after his loss. There are hints of martyrdom and transcendence of earthly fetters into a kingdom where love is married to glory and freedom.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Carlyle, "Democracy," in *Past and Present* (1897), rpt. in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. H. D. Traill, 30 vols. (New York: AMS Press, 1969), 10:209.

<sup>43</sup> John Ruskin, "The Nature of Gothic," in *The Stones of Venice*, rev. ed., 3 vols. (London: George Allen, 1898), 2:162. In G. K. Chesterton's phrase, "they were simply

Tories making out a romantic case for the return of Toryism” (“Introduction” to Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* [London: Dent, 1907], ix). See also Williams, 140.

<sup>44</sup> Dickens, 245.

<sup>45</sup> Kettle, 11-24, esp. 19-20.

<sup>46</sup> See Roger Sharrock, “Spiritual Autobiography in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*,” *The Review of English Studies* 24 (1948): 106.

<sup>47</sup> McKeon, 120. This complicates Watt’s position that “the novel arose in . . . a period whose general intellectual orientation was most decisively separated from its classical and mediaeval heritage by its rejection—or at least its attempted rejection—of universals” (12). Watt further denies *Oroonoko* such features of novelistic realism, arguing that Behn’s “prefatory asseverations are no more convincing than the very similar ones to be found in most works of mediaeval hagiography” (33).

<sup>48</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. and trans. James Hutton (New York: Norton, 1982), 54.

<sup>49</sup> Metzger, x.

<sup>50</sup> Beverle Houston, “Usurpation and Dismemberment: Oedipal Tyranny in *Oroonoko*,” *Literature and Psychology* 32 (1986): 33.

<sup>51</sup> McKeon, 249.

<sup>52</sup> James Sambrook, *The Eighteenth Century: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1700-1789* (London: Longman, 1986), 191-92.

<sup>53</sup> McKeon, 249.

<sup>54</sup> Jane Spencer suggests that, implicitly, an “uneasy note creeps into the narrator’s assessment of Coramantien, the place where natural honour and nobility are supposed to thrive.” What appear to be noble deeds may, in other words, be infested with power struggle and possessiveness. According to Spencer, “the whole Coramantien episode shows that heroic society torn apart by the quarrel between Oroonoko and his grandfather the king over possession of the heroine” (52).

<sup>55</sup> This is not helped by Sussman’s point that Oroonoko’s killing of Imoinda is his way of proving his male power and right of possession (224).

<sup>56</sup> There is hardly justification for Azim’s categorical claim that the reason why “the graphic description of torture and suffering is not punctuated by any comment from the author” is that she “has by now completely identified herself with the European community” (58).