Aphra Behn (1640-1689) was the first English woman to earn a living as a professional author. She was famous, especially, for her scandalous plays and as a woman of society (pictured right in an oil painting by the fashionable Restoration portraitist, Sir Peter Lely.)

Behn has long been an icon of feminist scholarship, celebrated, most famously, by Virginia Woolf in *A Room One’s Own* (1929): “She had to work on equal terms with men. She made, by working very hard, enough to live on. The importance of that fact outweighs anything that she actually wrote. . . . 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.”

Vita Sackville West, Woolf’s friend and contemporary, more colorfully, and less solemnly, writes: “The secret service, a debtor’s prison, a merry career as playwright and libertine, fame, friendship, love—all this was to be hers, but throughout all her vicissitudes the adventurous, independent character is dominant: she followed the path that she had chosen.

*(Aphra Behn: The Incomparable Astrea, 1927)*

For more about Behn’s life, consult the biographical portrait on the Poetry Foundation’s website.

Behn wrote *Oroonoko* at the end of her best-selling and scandal-filled literary career. Its title character Oroonoko, an African prince, is treacherously kidnapped by slave traders and sold as a slave in Suriname, on the northeastern coast of South America, during a brief period in the 1660s when Suriname was an English colony. Oroonoko’s life story is told by a female first-person narrator who claims to have been present in Suriname at the time, and to have heard the details of Oroonoko’s earlier life in Africa from Oroonoko himself.

Generically, *Oroonoko* descends from the genre of *heroic romance* (recounting the heroic exploits as well as the trials and tribulations of an aristocratic, valiant, fiercely loyal, and inflexibly high-minded hero) and from the genre of *love tragedy* (recounting the story of doomed lovers as, for example, Othello and Desdemona or Romeo and Juliet). In the early eighteenth-century *Oroonoko*
was recognized as a precursor to the **English novel**; in the later eighteenth-century, it was celebrated as a tear-jerking **anti-slavery or abolitionist tale**. I encourage you to keep these various generic possibilities in mind as you read Behn’s narrative.

**Reading Questions**

(Page numbers are keyed to the Oxford World’s Classics edition)

1. **Consider the two-part title given on the frontispiece to the first edition, left: Oroonoko: or, the Royal Slave.** Also consider the subtitle: *A True History*. What expectations does the frontispiece create for the narrative to come?

2. **The “Epistle Dedicatory”** that prefaces the narrative is a difficult read, devoted to the praise of Aphra Behn’s aristocratic patron, Lord Maitland. Feel free to skip over most of this letter, but pay close attention to its final paragraph (p. 5). How does Behn describe or dismiss her authorial efforts? How does she defend the veracity or truthfulness of her narrative? How does she characterize her relationship to its title character, Oroonoko—here referred to as “the royal slave” and, later, as “my slave”?

3. **What are your initial impressions of Behn’s female first-person narrator** (who may or may not be a fictional proxy for Behn herself)? What authority or experience does she claim as a storyteller? (p. 6)

4. **Much of the action of Oroonoko is set in the British colony of Suriname on the coast of South America.** What background information does the narrator supply about the indigenous people who live there? What relations do the European colonists cultivate with the Surinamese Indians? What attractions and “rarities”—animals, birds, insects, plants, made objects, articles of clothing—does the narrator describe? At what points does she interject, inserting herself into her list or catalog of items for trade? (pp. 6–7). NB: Behn’s narrator has an (annoying? meddling? controlling?) habit for interjecting herself into the narrative as an eyewitness or audience—be on the lookout for other examples of this!

5. **Why have the European colonists not enslaved the native population?** (p. 9). Where do the colony’s slaves come from? (p. 10).

6. **The action switches to the West Coast of Africa, to the king of Coramantien (a kingdom in Ghana), and to the king’s grandson, Oroonoko.** How does the narrator describe her first sight of Oroonoko? What features of his face and body does she pause over? What rhetorical function do superlatives constructions (“most awful”; “finest”) and gestures of dissimilarity and negation (“not of”; “instead of”; “far from”) play in her swooning description? (bottom of p. 11 and p. 12)
7. After returning from the wars, Oroonoko seeks an audience with Imoinda, the daughter of the dead general who saved his life on the battlefield. What gift or tribute does Oroonoko bring to this meeting? (p. 13)

8. Struck by Imoinda’s beauty Oroonoko soon falls deeply in love. Secretly betrothed (and monogamously inclined), the couple resolve to tell the aged king, Oroonoko’s despotic, lascivious, and impotent grandfather, of their marriage. But before they have chance to do so, the king forces Imoinda to become his concubine, joining the otan or palace “harem” of royal mistresses. What do we learn about the politics of the otan and of the court more generally from Imoinda’s captivity? How does the romantic intrigue between Onahal (an older, cast-off mistress of the king) and Aboan (Oroonoko’s loyal male companion) help Oroonoko gain access to Imoinda? (pp. 14-25)

9. The king banishes Oroonoko to the battlefield. Before departing, Oroonoko gains access to Imoinda’s bed chamber and claims her virginity, winning the fight for sexual control of her body. How does the female narrator describe—or fantasize— their sexual coupling? (pp. 25-26)

10. How does the king reassert his control over Imoinda’s body? What punishment does he inflict? Why does he decide to lie to Oroonoko, sending a messenger to tell him of Imoinda’s death? (pp. 27-28)

11. How does Oroonoko react to the news of Imoinda’s death? What course of action does he resolve on? What duties does he abdicate? What finally rouses him from his love-sick lethargy? (pp. 28-31)

12. With Oroonoko’s return to the royal court the narrative appears to have come to its conclusion, until the arrival of the English slaver ship launches the story anew. What kind of reception does the English captain receive at the royal court? What economic transaction does Oroonoko perform with him? How are Oroonoko and the male noblemen who accompany him tricked into boarding his ship? (pp. 33-34)

13. The ship arrives in the English colony of Surinam, and Oroonoko, against the promises of the dissimulating sea captain, is sold off in the first lot of slaves. In his journey up the river, Oroonoko is the constant object of mass observation, fascination, and veneration. Why is his disguise unsuccessful in deflecting all this public attention? How is Oroonoko greeted by his countrymen—men who he had himself sold into slavery? (pp. 37-40)

14. What impression does Oroonoko make on Trefry, the English gentleman who has purchased him? How is Trefry like or unlike the young African noblemen, Aboan and Jamoan, who became infatuated with him? (p. 38)

15. Trefry entertains Oroonoko/ Caesar (the name given to him when he becomes a slave) with the story of the beautiful slave girl, Clemene. What question does Oroonoko put to Trefry? How does Clemene’s ability to dissuade her white owner from raping her confirm the nobility of his—and her—character? (pp. 41-42)

16. How does the exchange of stories between men—Oroonoko confiding the events of his early life to Trefry as they journey upriver together (pp. 38-39); their discussion of the “fine she-slave” who attracts so many admirers (p. 41)—compete with the storytelling of the female narrator?
How does the narrator position her own secondary or belated narrative in relation to their male friendship and Trefry's firsthand knowledge of events? How does the fate of the British colony in Surinam influence the telling of Oroonoko's story? (p. 40)

17. As you may have guessed, the fair slave turns out to be Imoinda. How does the narrator describe the lovers’ reunion? (pp. 42-43). What is Trefry's reaction? (p. 43) Who does he immediately go and tell? (p. 44)

18. Carefully read the curious paragraph that opens as an acknowledgment of omission: “I had forgot to tell you ...” (p. 44). How does this description of the tattooed bodies of the lovers connect contemporary Africa first to Asia, through the technique of “japanning,” and then to a primitive British past, “our ancient Picts”?

19. After the marriage of Caesar/Oroonoko and Clemene/Imoinda, and, especially, after Imoinda becomes pregnant, the narrator stops being a passive observer and is drawn more closely into events. How does she become complicit in placating Oroonoko, diverting him from thoughts of insurrection? What kinds of entertainments does she provide for the couple? What other physical or sporting pursuits are proposed to keep Oroonoko occupied during his captivity? (pp. 45-46)

20. What do we learn of the narrator’s history, and of her style of living in the colony? (pp. 47-48).

21. In a series of adventurous episodes, the narrator and her entourage of ladies venture away from the plantation into the forest with Oroonoko as their guide and protector. They go tiger hunting (p. 49-51), fishing (pp. 51-52), and visit an Indian village (pp. 52-57). What is the function of these episodes? What do they reveal about Oroonoko and his relationship with the British women, and the narrator in particular? Who is being entertained here? How do these gentlemanly adventures of tiger-hunting, eel-grabbing and ethnographic encounters obscure or work to elide the forced labor of the slave economy?

22. Despite the best efforts of the narrator to divert him, Oroonoko leads a slave revolt. What arguments does he make to rally his fellow—male—slaves? How does his speech differentiate between war slavery or slavery by conquest, on the one hand, and economic or chattel slavery, on the other? How does Oroonoko characterize the British slave masters? (pp. 57-58)

23. The escaped slaves are pursued by the colonists into the forest. What causes the slaves, except for Tuscan, Oroonoko, and Imoinda, to abandon the fight? What weapon does Imoinda wield and who does she wound? How is this wound treated? (pp. 60-61)

24. The interim Governor of the colony, the treacherous Byam, attempts to persuade Oroonoko to surrender, although it falls to Trefry to convince him. How does Oroonoko characterize his fellow slaves during these negotiations? (pp. 62-63)

25. Once back at the plantation, Byam reneges on his promise, subjecting Oroonoko and Tuscan to a brutal flogging, rubbing pepper into the lacerations made by the whip to make them sting the more. After describing this scene of torture, the narrator explains why she herself was absent during the revolt and its aftermath. Where was she, and why? How does her absence protect or distance her from the more troubling aspects of her story? (pp. 63-65)

26. In the course of the story’s increasingly gory finale, Oroonoko murders his wife (with her consent) and their unborn child, first cutting her throat and then severing her head from her
body. Enfeebled by grief, he finds himself unable to move from Imoinda’s side. How are the search party able to find him? (pp. 67-70).

27. After attempting to end his own life, Oroonoko is carried back to the plantation and tended there by the female narrator (pp. 70-71). Why is she not present for Oroonoko’s heroic death? (pp. 71-72). What nationality is his torturer/executioner? (p. 72) What does Oroonoko do throughout his torture? (p. 72) Who is in attendance at his execution? What happens to the dismembered parts of Oroonoko’s corpse? What other displays of severed anatomy or mutilated body parts have we seem throughout the narrative? To what extent is the narrator’s authorial labors an attempted act of reassembly or reparation? (pp. 72-73)