

# Mothering the English Novel: Aphra Behn and the Anti-Racist Themes of *Oroonoko*

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## Abstract

Aphra Behn wrote the first novel in the English language. She may justly be called, 'Mother of the English Novel'. Behn's *Oroonoko* [2], predates Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* by thirteen years. Although her highly original work of fiction has sometimes been dismissed as a 'romance', similar to the proto-fiction that appeared in the previous century, her work in fact marks a wholly new departure in English literature. It bears the hallmarks – the narration of events as recalled and filtered through the eyes of its characters; the interest in exact narrative detail; the claim that the tale is a true story, and based on eye-witness accounts – that thereafter would define the novel proper. *Oroonoko* is now generally agreed to draw on the author's first-hand experience, albeit highly fictionalised, of a period spent in the Dutch colony of Surinam, in South America. Behn's novel is remarkable in the period when it was written, for the respect with which its narrator describes the customs of indigenous peoples, and the dignity and courage of native-born Africans, the novel's heroes. In her tale of the rebellion and tragic fate of a noble and heroic African prince, and of his wife Imoinda, Behn not only wrote the first English novel, but – nearly two centuries before *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – the first work of fiction to denounce the institution of slavery.

**Keywords:** Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko*, 17<sup>th</sup> Century Literature, women's writing, Restoration women, anti-slavery literature, colonialism.

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## INTRODUCTION

'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' [1]. So said Virginia Woolf, a gifted, outspoken and highly original writer of the twentieth century, in acknowledging her debt to a boldly independent forebear of the seventeenth, who first gave the modern novel form to the English language.

*Oroonoko* [2] is not only the first novel by a woman, but the first novel – in the modern sense of the word – ever published. Its author was a professional writer, a poet and a playwright, who earned her living by her pen.

1 *A Room of One's Own*. London: Hogarth Press, 1929. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992, p. 82. Woolf's feminist text, a call for the recognition and appreciation of the work of female writers, was a published version of lectures she gave to the students of women's colleges at Cambridge, in 1928.

Even though *Robinson Crusoe* was not published until over thirteen years after Behn's novel, the title of 'Father of the English novel' is usually accorded to Behn's younger contemporary, Daniel Defoe. Yet, it is *Oroonoko* that is the first work in English to offer a coherent fictional world, with credible, rounded characters interacting in settings evoked by careful descriptive detail – with everything, in short, that readers came to expect of the new genre.

The very term 'novel' means, of course, something new – a departure from earlier traditions of fable and romance, where idyllic settings and fantastic events predominate, and the events described take precedence over any attempt to depict character. A glance at Philip Sidney's prose romance, *Arcadia*, of 1580, or even a work like Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* [3], will immediately show the difference between such romances and tales, and anything we might recognise as the novel proper today – beginning with Behn's *Oroonoko*.

## Historical Context

The novel, as such, came into being with the evolution of a new class of readers. The development of the printing press made possible the wide distribution of written works of all kinds. Religious reforms, that made people eager to read the Bible and other religious texts in their native languages, where before such texts were available only to those who read Greek and Latin, in turn encouraged people of the middle classes – artisans, shopkeepers, and traders – to become literate, and to educate their families. In England, the hunger for the printed word was given a further impetus by the furious political campaigning and polemical writing that took place during the nine years of civil war between Puritan supporters of Parliament, and champions of King Charles I, that ended in 1651. After the execution of the King in 1649, a Puritan republic or ‘Commonwealth’ was established under the rule of Oliver Cromwell, that lasted for a decade.

After Cromwell died, when Charles I’s son was recalled from exile in France, and crowned Charles II, a now widely literate public became hungry for types of literature other than religious sermons and political pamphlets. People wanted entertainment. The theatres, closed and banned during the Commonwealth, were re-opened, with a new style of play, the so-called comedy of manners. Witty, satirical poetry circulated among a highly cultivated upper class. For the sons and daughters of the middle classes, there would soon be a new genre – the novel form, as pioneered by Aphra Behn, and carried on in the eighteenth century by Defoe, Eliza Haywood, and Frances Burney; by Richardson, Fielding and Sterne.

Behn’s *Oroonoko*, while it certainly does not belong to the category of earlier tales and romances, to which it is often dismissively assigned, also differs markedly from the works of sentimental fiction, produced mainly for a female readership, that began appearing in the early eighteenth century, a few decades after Behn’s death. These stories, with their focus on seduction, love and marriage, could hardly differ more in sensibility from the robust attitudes exhibited in Behn’s works. In fact, Behn was frequently skeptical of ideas of ‘true love’, believing that they limited a woman’s freedom. She actually belongs to a very different context. As a prolific author of plays, poetry and translations, as well as of fiction, her closest affinities are with an elite circle of literary ‘wits’ at the court of Charles II. It was a world of bohemians and rakes, where men and women freely took lovers, and where the King himself had at least twelve children by different mistresses. It was a cynical, corrupt environment – far more corrupt than the court had ever been in the years before the Civil War – a world in which people made use of one another for whatever they could gain from a relationship, casting the other person aside, once they no longer proved useful.

Aphra Behn’s place in this glittering but morally dubious world was never fully secure. When she came to the attention of Charles and his circle, she was already in her twenties, having lived through all the years of the Civil War and the Commonwealth. From a humble social background – she was the daughter of a barber-surgeon and a wet-nurse – the ambitious young woman was a parvenu in the glittering, snobbish world of the aristocracy. She had to make her own way there, earning a living by her wits. She won acceptance among the aristocracy by the exercise of her intelligence, her good looks, her charm – and her literary talent. A professional writer, she supported herself by the work of her pen, with little other means of subsistence. While in her twenties, she may have done a little spying work overseas for Charles II, but he treated her ungratefully, and soon dispensed with her services. There would be times of penury, and even the odd spell in a debtor’s prison.

Her literary accomplishments were recognised by the most gifted fellow-writers of the day. The brilliant, if dissolute, Earl of Rochester was one of the first to praise her work and to encourage her to develop her creative talent (p. 196) [4]. The poet-playwright John Dryden admired her verse, as well as her abilities as a dramatist (p. 262) [4]. She became known as the leading playwright of the early Restoration, with sixteen of her plays performed in London between 1670 and 1687. Queen Catherine is said to have taken a leading role in one of these productions. Several of the plays have been successfully revived on the London stage in recent years<sup>2</sup>. In 1999, the Royal Shakespeare Company staged a new production of *Oroonoko* – directed by Gregory Doran, and very freely adapted from Behn’s original text, by the Nigerian playwright, Biyi Bandele<sup>3</sup> [5, 6].

Behn’s novel *Oroonoko*, published in the last year of her life, when she was in her late forties, and loosely based on experiences as a traveller in South America in her youth, while it tells an exciting story, may be seen as her most serious and socially engaged work, and the product of her maturity as a writer [2].

2 Including *The Lucky Chance*, at the Royal Court, in 1984; *The Rover*, by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1986, and again by RADA, in 2015; and *The Widow Ranter*, in October 2018.

3 See Anne Widmayer’s somewhat ambivalent, and not altogether favourable, critique of Bandele’s production, in her article, ‘The Politics of Adapting Behn’s *Oroonoko*’. In *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 37, No. 2, Summer 2003, pp. 189-223. A far more appreciative assessment appears in an anonymous review of the production in the *Telegraph* newspaper, where it is praised for ‘dramatic strength and physical energy’. ‘Powerful Tale of slavery takes RSC into rich new territory’. *The Telegraph*, January 26, 1999.

## Analysis

*Oroonoko* is unique in its day, not only in being the first English novel, but in taking a black man and a slave – albeit a slave of royal descent – as its hero. The setting, too, is remarkable, being a detailed depiction of the two worlds of the West Africa of Oroonoko's birth, and that of Surinam, on the north-eastern coast of South America, which at that time was under the control of the English.

If one believes Behn's contemporary, Charles Gilden, who wrote a biography of her, she composed *Oroonoko* even while company were present, and completed the (fairly short) novel at a single sitting. However that may be, Behn gives us a dramatic and compelling story.

For many years, controversy existed about whether Behn herself had ever been in Surinam, or whether she wrote about the place only from hearsay<sup>4</sup> [7, 8, 9]. It is now generally agreed however, that she did spend time in the British colony there. Her biographer Janet Todd suggests that possibly she was sent there when in her twenties, as a spy and agent for the British Crown<sup>5</sup> (pp:32-35) [4, 10]. Details in the novel itself suggest direct experience of the place – not merely descriptions of the plants and animals, that could have been found in the narratives of travellers, but phrases in the language of the indigenous people of Surinam, and descriptions of their food and furniture.

In a gesture that would become standard in the early novel – one much imitated by Defoe – the female narrator of *Oroonoko* claims to be giving us, not a work of fiction, but merely a careful record of actual events, to which 'I was myself an eye-witness'; or that she heard 'from the mouth of the chief actor in this history,

4 See, for example, an early twentieth-century commentator, Ernest Bernbaum, in his essay, 'Mrs. Behn's *Oroonoko*. In *Anniversary Papers by Colleagues and Pupils of George Lyman Kittredge*. Boston: Ginn, 1913, pp. 419–34. For Bernbaum, Behn drew most of her information from the tales and travel narratives of others. Katharine Rogers considers Bernbaum's attempt to prove Behn's lack of 'authenticity' as a misogynist attempt to discredit the work of a female author, 'in accordance with the general tendency of male-dominated criticism at the time to sneer at pioneering women writers'. See Rogers' 'Fact and Fiction in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*', in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Spring 1988, pp. 1–15.

5 Todd, pp. 32–35. Writing fifty years earlier, H.A. Hargreaves noted, in addition, that Behn's skilful deployment of first-person narrative was also what 'captured the fancy of the reading public' down the generations. 'New Evidence of the Realism of Mrs. Behn's *Oroonoko*', in the *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, Vol. 74, January–December, 1970, pp. 437–44.

the hero himself'. She has no need, this (fictional) narrator says, to embellish her tale with invented imaginary details, 'there being enough of reality to support it, and to render it diverting, without the addition of invention' (p. 147) [2].

The novel, with the figure of a royal 'noble savage' at its centre, offers an implicit challenge to an entire literature, dating from the late fifteenth century, that dealt with 'exotic' peoples – and Africans in particular – as primitive and savage – monstrous, even. In her character of Oroonoko, Behn gives us a dignified figure – a man of royal blood, fluent in several languages; curious about different cultures; portrayed as having a keen sense of honour – superior to that of the white people who lie to and betray him. In education and manners, we are told, he is the equal of any prince of Europe:

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; and would have confessed that Oroonoko was as capable even of reigning well, and of governing as wisely, had as great a soul, as politick maxims, and was as sensible of power, as any prince civilized in the most refined schools of humanity and learning, or the most illustrious courts (p. 154) [2].

The society Oroonoko comes from, is depicted as more consistent in its sexual morality, than that of Western Europe. While the prince remains devoted to a single woman, his beloved Imoinda, others in his world practise polygamy. The men 'take to themselves as many as they can maintain'. What they do not do, the narrator observes, is to commit the 'crime and sin' of abandoning a former wife or concubine, 'to want, shame and misery'. Such inhumane behaviour is only to be found 'in Christian countries, where they prefer the bare name of religion; and, without virtue or morality, think that sufficient' (p. 156) [2].

The indigenous people of Surinam are also respectfully portrayed. They are helpful to one another, and to the settlers. Their ethical codes are shown as different, but also possibly superior, to those of the Europeans. Their nakedness is not represented as an indication of backwardness or savagery, but as a normal and natural aspect of life in a hot climate. As described, it evokes an image of the ideal human state before man's fall into sin, and expulsion from the Garden of Eden:

They are extreme modest and bashful, very shy, and nice of being touched. And though they are all thus naked, if one lives for ever among them there is not to be seen an undecent action or glance: and being continually used to

see one another so unadorned, so like our first parents before the Fall, it seems as if they had no wishes, there being nothing to heighten curiosity; but all you can see, you see at once, and where there is no novelty, there can be no curiosity (p. 150) [2].

The morals of supposedly more 'primitive' people are favourably contrasted with those of white Europeans. The natives of Surinam are shocked when the English Governor, having made an agreement to meet with them, fails to keep the appointment. When he breaks his promise in this way, they do not hesitate to call him a liar (p. 150) [2].

The duplicity of the settlers towards Africans in general, and towards Oroonoko in particular, is represented as much worse than the Governor's failure to keep an appointment. The first betrayal occurs in Africa, when Oroonoko is shanghaied aboard an English ship, and carried off from his native home. When he asks the ship's captain at least to free him from his chains and allow him to walk about on deck, giving his word of honour that he will not attempt to rebel or escape, the captain replies that he cannot 'resolve to trust a heathen' – a man without faith in the God of the Christians. Oroonoko has a ready answer. If someone swears by God, as the Christians do, no one, he says will ever know whether God punishes him for breaking his word. If he swears by his honour, however, everyone can soon witness whether the oath was kept. In that case, the oath-breaker 'suffers every moment the scorn and contempt of the honest world, and dies every day ignominiously in his fame, which is more valuable than life'. How could anyone imagine, Oroonoko adds, that 'he who will violate his honour could ever be expected to keep his word to God'? (p.181) [2]. The captain unchains Oroonoko, not because he is convinced by the prince's argument, but because he hopes Oroonoko will persuade the other captured Africans to break their fast to the death, and save him from losing so valuable a cargo.

As previously mentioned, Behn's *Oroonoko* has often been denied the status of a fully-fledged novel. This is to dismiss the obvious novelistic features of *Oroonoko*, that later writers would build on. There is the keen sense of actual historical context, with the fragile tenure of the English settlers on the lands in Surinam, where they brutally exploit the captured Africans, and anticipation of the relinquishing of the territory to the control of the Dutch. There is the device, previously alluded to, of claiming that the fiction is a true history of actual events – a device that later writers would adopt enthusiastically<sup>6</sup> [4, 11]. Above all, there is

the filtering of the narrative through the distinctive view and perspective of a particular narrator.

It has been argued that the character of Oroonoko belongs to the world of idyll and fable, because it is too idealised to be credible. This is to overlook the complexity of Behn's fictional framework, in which the male hero is viewed wholly through the eyes of the female character who tells his story. It is this narrator's idealising view of him, with a respect and admiration that borders on infatuation, that is the only perspective the reader is ever allowed to see. The narrator must know that a mutual love between herself and Oroonoko is impossible. But she is free to celebrate her near-worshipful attitude to him in words that, by the time she comes to tell her tale, she knows he will never read; and to express her feelings for him, without running any risk of commitment.

This narrator's role is at times an ambivalent one. On the one hand, she admires Oroonoko – his nobility and generosity, his courage and dignity. On the other, she acquiesces in the role assigned to her by the white settlers, of keeping the prince – renamed 'Caesar' after he has been carried off from West Africa and enslaved in Surinam – under surveillance. She acquiesces in the decision of Oroonoko's new master to change his name: 'For the future therefore I must call Oroonoko Caesar; since by that name only he was known in our western world, and by that name he was received on shore at Parham House, where he was destin'd a slave' (p. 186) [2].

Although not required to work like other slaves, in recognition of his royal birth, the prince frets at captivity, and demands to know when the whites will honour their promise to set him free: 'He was every day treating with Trefry [the master] ... offer'd either gold, or a vast quantity of slaves, which should be paid before they let him go, provided he could have any security that he should go when his ransom was paid.' Trefry and the other settlers give Oroonoko constant assurances, that serve only to make him more suspicious of their true intentions:

They fed him from day to day with promises, and delay'd him till the Lord- Governour should come; so that he began to suspect them

nicknamed 'The Black Boy'.) Todd views *Oroonoko*, then, less as a work of fiction in its own right, than as a political fable, a message of warning addressed to the King, to beware of the threats to his rule posed by treacherous enemies. See Todd, pp. 436-7. To make the argument, however, she has to place greater weight on it, then the slender narrative will credibly bear. Other critics see parallels with classical history and legend – with the fates of Achilles, and of Julius Caesar. See, Hoegberg, David E: 'Caesar's Toils: Allusion and Rebellion in *Oroonoko*'. In *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 7, No. 3, April, 1995, pp. 239–58.

<sup>6</sup> Todd has even argued that the character of Oroonoko is intended as a compliment to James II, who succeeded to the English throne after the death of Charles II, his father. (James was sometimes



of falsehood, and that they would delay him till the time of his wife's delivery and make a slave of that too: for all the breed is theirs to whom the parents belong. [2]

Like the rest, the narrator comes to fear that Oroonoko might try to stir up a rebellion among the other slaves. The role assigned her, is to entertain and reassure him:

I was obliged, by some persons who fear'd a mutiny (which is very fatal sometimes in those colonies that abound so with slaves, that they exceed the whites in vast numbers) to discourse with Caesar, and to give him all the satisfaction I possibly could: They knew he and Clemene [Imoinda, Oroonoko's wife] were scarce an hour in a day from my lodgings; that they eat with me, and that I oblig'd 'em in all things I was capable of. I entertained them with the loves of the Romans, and great men, which charmed him to my company; and her, with teaching her all the pretty works that I was mistress of, and telling her stories of nuns, and endeavouring to bring her to the knowledge of the true God (p. 191-2) [2].

For all her hospitality towards Oroonoko and his wife Clemene / Imoinda, the narrator willingly takes on the role of Oroonoko's keeper:

I neither thought it convenient to trust him much out of our view, nor did the country who fear'd him; but with one accord it was advis'd to treat him fairly, and oblige him to remain within such a compass, and that he should be permitted, as seldom as could be, to go up to the plantations of the negroes; or, if he did, to be accompany'd by some that should be rather in appearance attendants than spies (p. 194) [2].

Behn would have known that the settlers' fear of a slave revolt was no mere paranoid fantasy. In 1665 – roughly the time at which Behn herself is likely to have been involved with events in Surinam as an agent for the English King – the English Deputy Governor, William Byam, bore witness to the dangers of insurgency. Byam – who appears as a singularly unpleasant character in Behn's novel – bore testimony to what he termed the 'insolencies of our Negroes, killing our stock, breaking open houses ... and some flying into the woods in rebellion' (p. 341) [8].

Behn notoriously entertained an exaggerated reverence for royalty – not least for the Stuart kings who governed England after the Restoration – but also for the heroes of her imagination. In *Oroonoko*, her fictional narrator expresses herself lost in admiration for the princely Oroonoko, as he is brought upriver into the heartland of Surinam:

The fame of Oroonoko was gone before him, and all people were in admiration of his beauty. Besides, he had a rich habit on, in which he was taken, so different from the rest, and which the captain could not strip him of, because he was forced to surprise his person in the minute he sold him. [2]

Oroonoko dislikes being exposed to the staring of the crowds who turn out to see him, wearing his splendid robes, and asks his new master to clothe him in 'something more befitting a slave'. In spite of the change in dress, 'he shone through all'. The rough, simple clothing, the narrator tells us

Could not conceal the graces of his looks and mien; and he had no less admirers than when he had his dazzling habit on: The royal youth appeared in spite of the slave, and people could not help treating him after a different manner, without designing it. As soon as they approached him, they venerated and esteemed him; his eyes insensibly commanded respect, and his behaviour insinuated it into every soul. So that there was nothing talked of but this young and gallant slave, even by those who yet knew not that he was a prince (p. 185) [2].

It is incorrect, however, to assume that the author is unaware of the brutality meted out to the ordinary African slaves in Surinam. In calling on them to take back their freedom for themselves, Oroonoko addresses them:

Caesar, having singled out these men from the women and children, made an harangue to 'em, 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. He told 'em, it was not for days, months or years, but for eternity; there was no end to be of their misfortunes: They suffered not like men, who might find a glory and fortitude in oppression; but like dogs, that loved the whip and bell, and fawned the more they were beaten. [2]

However blameless, and whether they work or not, they are forced to toil under 'the infamous whip'.

Oroonoko, it should be noted, has himself sold his countrymen into slavery in former days. In his early bargaining with the master, Trefry, he is quite prepared to offer, as we have seen, 'a vast quantity of slaves' to be offered to Trefry as the price of his freedom. Are we, perhaps, being asked to understand that Oroonoko has

gained a new awareness of the slave's plight, by his experiences in Surinam?<sup>7</sup>.

However we reconcile this seeming contradiction, Behn puts into the mouth of Oroonoko – or rather, into the words of her narrator, who is not present when he makes this speech, but rather gives us an imaginary reconstruction of it, after the event – her acknowledgement of the brutal exploitation to which the African slaves were subjected in the colonial plantations. It is characteristic of her, that she considers not only the slave's physical suffering, but the indignity and loss of self-respect: 'That they had lost the divine quality of men, and were become insensible asses, fit only to bear'<sup>8</sup> [2, 12].

When Oroonoko, with his beloved Imoinda, who is still pregnant with his child, takes flight from the colony, taking all the other slaves with him, the settlers are terrified, and all expect to be slaughtered. There is a definite question mark, however, over whether Oroonoko does harbour thoughts of revenge. His goal, we are told, is to get away from the colony and found a new settlement, where he and Imoinda can live with their child in freedom. It is an aspiration that can only end in tragedy, as Behn's narrator recounts and laments the hero's gruesome end.

It is *Oroonoko*, I would argue, rather than Harriet Beecher Stowe's nineteenth-century protest novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that should be seen as the first anti-slavery fiction in the English language. There was recognition of this in continental Europe, where a French translation appeared in 1745, 44 years before the French Revolution<sup>9</sup> [13, 14].

## CONCLUSION

Behn's novel continued to be successful, both as a widely-read novel, and in the form of a play by Thomas Southerne, an adaptation first staged in 1695,

7 Biyi Bandele's script for the Royal Shakespeare Company, alluded to above, conveniently omits this detail in Behn's text.

8 Behn may have been aware of the polemic in the London press of 1667, by George Warren. Warren writes that slaves in Surinam 'are sold like dogs, and no better esteemed but for their Work sake, which they perform all the Week with the severest usages for the slightest fault.' Quoted in Moira Ferguson, 'Oroonoko: Birth of a Paradigm', *New Literary History*, Vol. 23, No. 2, Spring 1992, pp. 339-59

9 *Oroonoko*, traduit de l'Anglois de Madame Behn. Amsterdam, 1745. Ernest Baker, in his introduction to Behn's works, written in 1905, concurs, calling *Oroonoko* 'the first emancipation novel'. See Baker's Introduction to *The Novels of Mrs. Aphra Behn*. London: Routledge 1905, pp. vii-xxi.

and published the following year. If *Oroonoko* is to be understood as an anti-slavery polemic, however, Southerne's work must be seen as a travesty of Behn's original intentions. Imoinda becomes a white heroine, rather than a beautiful black African<sup>10</sup> [15, 16].

Many of Behn's works continued to be read and enjoyed throughout the best part of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It was only with the prudish attitudes of the late Victorian era, when Behn's writings – particularly her admittedly sometimes bawdy verse, but also her plays – came to be regarded as unsuitable for family reading, that her fame suffered an eclipse. In the early decades of the twentieth, however – at least partly thanks to the championship of her sister author, Virginia Woolf, another pioneer, her fame enjoyed a revival. Behn's works – *Oroonoko* in particular – are widely read and studied today.

At the close of the novel, the narrator seems to drop her mask. We hear the voice of the author, assuring us that Oroonoko and his bride will, thanks to her celebration of this tragic couple, never be forgotten:

I hope, 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 (p. 224) [2].

It seems she did not hope in vain.

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- 10 See Paula R. Backscheider (Ed.), *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 80. Detroit: Gale, 1989. The implications of this drastic change are explored in detail in a thought-provoking essay by Joyce Green Macdonald – 'Race, Women, and the Sentimental in Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko*': *Criticism*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Fall, 1998, pp. 555-70.

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