Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and the English Novel

As mentioned earlier in this course, many critics cite Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719, as the first fully formed English novel. However, we will begin our investigation of the novel with a text published more than 30 years earlier, Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*. There are many reasons why Behn’s short prose tale has a complex relationship to the question of the development of the novel as a form. First, she does not speak of her tale as a novel, as it was not yet a term used with much frequency at the time; however, in 1696, Behn included *Oroonoko* in a collection of her histories and novels. Likewise, Defoe did not speak of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders*, or *Roxana* as novels; instead, *Crusoe* and *Roxana* proclaimed themselves to be histories. It was only in the second half of the 18th century that the term *novel* began to have some stability for defining a particular kind of prose story. To some extent, Behn was not recognized as the first English novelist, because she was a woman and because she did not, like Defoe, publish multiple works that might be considered novels. It also seemed to be the case that unlike Defoe’s *Crusoe*, which immediately began to influence and shape longer prose works, Behn’s *Oroonoko* had less of a direct impact on prose productions than, through its adaptation to the stage, on other types of literary output. Yet, as many feminist critics have argued, literary history has tended to overlook just how much *Oroonoko* and other works by Behn helped to establish a foundation for the development of the novel and, in particular, for the work of women novelists.

*Oroonoko* also has a strange place in the history of the development of the English novel due to its politics and its plot. While now read in terms of its depiction of the horrors of slavery, much of the work’s emphasis is less on the evil of slavery than on the innate nobility of its hero—after all, its subtitle is “The Royal Slave.” For J. Paul Hunter, one of the leading historians of English fiction of this period, Behn’s fiction “usually (but not always) looked backward toward the ideals and manners of high-life romance rather than toward present-centered stories of the ordinary and everyday” (1990). These are key terms for Hunter and many other historians of the novel who frequently track the development of novel alongside the development of modernity and modern politics and society. While many works were spoken of as both romances and novels, for many critics, the novel emerges in distinction to the romance. The romance focused on aristocratic characters enacting stereotyped plots across mythic settings involving fantastic elements, whereas the novel focused on the common people and emphasized realistic details, deep psychology, and specific place-settings. Further, the romance was associated with Tory politics (Behn was devoted to the crown), whereas the novel—with its emphasis on the middle-class and on a new social order—was linked to the mercantile economics and politics of the Whigs. The romance was often set in a mystified and enchanted past, whereas the novel tended to focus on contemporaneous settings. On the one hand, *Oroonoko*’s exotic settings, its larger-than-life hero, its emphasis on his nobility and on royal power, and its lack of concern for everyday persons and events partake more in the romance tradition. On the other, its emphasis on the narrator’s first-hand experience and its attention to the geographical details of
Surinam as well as the psychology of its hero seems to prefigure some of the features of Defoe’s works.

Some critics have attempted to reconcile Behn’s anti-modern and anti-bourgeois monarchism, which seem to be at odds with the rise of the novel, with the novel through reading the text as an anti-slavery work. Through its racial egalitarianism, *Oroonoko* parallels other early examples of the novel-form in their expansion of literary attention beyond upper-class Europeans. *Oroonoko’s* exact stance on slavery and on race is more difficult or confused than that perspective suggests. What makes Oroonoko so noble and a great hero is something that transcends race and suggests Behn’s commitment to the notion of a natural aristocracy. Thus, more recent critics have attempted to locate Behn’s work within the intersecting contexts of gender, class, and colonialism, and in doing so have begun to rethink how her work might reshape our understanding of the origins of the English novel. On one level, we might see *Oroonoko* as suggesting how Behn was able to use a colonial setting to safely comment both on politics in England (1688, the year of its publication, was also the year of Parliament removing James II from the throne) and on Puritanical attempts to limit the role of women in the public sphere, especially in theatres, the place Behn had made her living as a playwright. Oroonoko’s innate nobility contrasts with the European colonists who seem to represent the worst elements of an emerging capitalist ethos. In this light, *Oroonoko* is less an indictment of slavery than of an unnatural social order that allows ignoble individuals to gain power over the true aristocrats who should rule.

For some more recent critics, it is the setting in the colonies that links *Oroonoko* and *Robinson Crusoe* as important examples of the early English novel. Where Behn uses the setting to defend what she sees as a natural order defined by the inherited power of the monarchy and aristocracy, Defoe uses the colonies as a way to test the individualism of a member of the emergent middle-class. For Behn, innate nobility provides the counter to the potential dangers of a liberated, economically interested populace; for Defoe, it is Puritanistic self-reflection that reforms the young Crusoe and brings him back into a life of virtue. In both cases, it is the English encounter with the New World and with the new social and environmental conditions it promises that give rise to a new literary form. *Oroonoko*, then, helps to resituate the emergence of the English novel within the broader imperial context of British letters, emphasizing the different political commitments the form could articulate and further suggesting how during the early decades of its existence the line separating the novel from other forms remained blurry at best.

**Summary**

- Despite appearing 30 years before Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, the work most often cited as the first English novel, Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, has often been excluded from discussions of the development of the English novel.
• That exclusion derives from the novel’s aristocratic politics, its exotic setting, and its romance-like plot, yet it also may derive from a failure of past literary historians to regard the works of women authors with the same seriousness.

• Oroonoko’s class politics complicate its relationship to standard histories of the English novel and emphasize the diversity of perspectives the novel form could embody, even as its colonial setting suggests the centrality of the imperial context for the emergence of the form.

References