Articulāte

Volume 11 Article 5

2006

The Contexts of Behn's *Oroonoko*, and its Role in the Canon

Ben Progany
Denison University

The Contexts of Behn's *Oroonoko*, and its Role in the Canon

Ben Pogany '06

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* is a difficult work to classify. Written and published in post–civil war England, it dealt largely with the experiences of non-European characters in Suriname, a tiny and short-lived British colony that most Britons were only dimly aware of. *Oroonoko* was also a novelty in its form, blending features of the medieval romance and travel narrative genre called the "Brief, True Relation." Despite these ambiguities, or rather, because of them, William C. Spengemann makes the claim that *Oroonoko* should be considered the earliest American novel. Whenever scholars attempt to expand or modify the literary canon, both literary and historical considerations ought to be weighed carefully. In this paper, I will argue that although Spengemann's claims are certainly interesting, I find that they do not adequately justify the inclusion of *Oroonoko* among early American colonial literature. My purpose in this paper will be to demonstrate that Behn's *Oroonoko*, although one of the earliest novels, does not constitute a work of American literature. I intend to justify my claim largely using methods from New Historicist criticism, and in doing so, I hope to also illuminate some of the historical and literary background of the novel itself.

Spengemann's Claims – Geographical and Cultural Relationships

In his article "The Earliest American Novel: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*," William Spengemann uses three major arguments to justify the historical re-positioning of Behn's novel. His first argument is that a literary work need not have been written in the territories of the future United States to be considered American. Spengemann reasons that since the United States did not exist politically until 1776, no writer on the American continent before then could be considered more any American than any other. He refers to John Smith's *Generall Historie* as an example of a work that is conventionally considered American, even though John Smith was English, as was Behn (199). He also makes note of the cultural similarity between *Oroonoko*'s setting in Suriname and some of the North American British colonies: "Virginia and Carolina had far more in common with the Caribbean colonies than with Massachusetts bay or Connecticut, while each individual colony was apt to be in closer touch with England than with any other part of British America." (200)

While Spengemann's argument that no archetypical American national temperament existed yet in 1688 (the year of *Oroonoko*'s publication) is plausible, his claim of the cultural similarity between Virginia and the Caribbean seems to be more of a strike against Smith than one in favor of Behn. Spengemann seems to imply that Smith's *Generall Historie* and Behn's *Oroonoko*, in their historical aspects, are equally useful accounts of America's early colonial period. There are a number of problems with this claim. First, Spengemann ignores many important differences that existed between Virginia and the British colonies of South America and the Caribbean. The Virginia settlement described in Smith's *Historie* was a charter colony of Britain, whereas Suriname was a so-called "royal" colony. Under charter from the king, the Virginia colonists were permitted a fair degree self-governance to encourage permanent European settlement. The colony in Suriname, like other South American royal colonies, existed solely to produce wealth (in the form of sugar) for export back to England. For this reason, the institution of slavery in Virginia differed greatly from its counterparts in South America. Joanna Lipking notes that 4 to 5 million slaves were imported into South America

and the Caribbean, whereas only a half million were imported into North America (83). She also notes that North American slaves rarely experienced the brutal living conditions and treatment that their South American counterparts did. Considering how much of *Oroonoko* deals with South American slavery, the book would be historically out of place in a course on North American literature.

Spengemann also ignores the history of Suriname after the events of *Oroonoko*. Suriname was ultimately short-lived as a British colony – less than 10 years after Behn's stay there, the settlement had been traded to the Dutch, and would remain in their hands until 1975 (Lipking 83). The subsequent history of Suriname diverges so much from the political and cultural experiences of North America that it is irrelevant to recount any of it in relation to United States history. This is reflected in the fact that most American schoolchildren know that Jamestown as the first successful American colony, but know very little about Suriname. The sort of colonialism described in Smith's *Generall Historie* that is ultimately more representative of the North American experience than *Oroonoko* is, and at least the historical aspects of Smith's work warrant it a place in American literature, even if its literary aspects do not. However, for Spengemann to imply that *Oroonoko* is culturally or historically relevant to American literature is simply erroneous.

***Oroonoko's* Literary Features**

Spengemann's second justification for understanding *Oroonoko* as the earliest American novel lies in the book's literary characteristics. That is to say, *Oroonoko* is not worth studying solely because of its historical interest, but also because it is one of the earliest novels. Spengemann notes that literature is not made American by being written in an American form, nor does such a form necessarily even exist (200). This claim is perfectly correct – the great American novels and poems of the 19th and 20th centuries often imitated European forms, and are nevertheless considered quintessentially American. Instead, Spengemann reiterates the popular critical opinion that *Oroonoko* is worthy of special attention for the fact that it is an early anticipation of the novel form. I fully agree with Spengemann on this matter, and I think that it will be useful to summarize his description of *Oroonoko*'s formal features here.

Spengemann writes that *Oroonoko* is actually an amalgam of two other literary genres with which Behn was familiar: the medieval romance, and the so-called "Brief, True Relations" from the New World. The romance tale is often mentioned as a major formal precursor of the prose novel, and Behn, a lifelong reader and admirer of the form, was well versed in its conventions. The influence of romance literature in *Oroonoko* is most evident in the first half, which is set in the royal courts of Africa. The emotional courtship of Oroonoko and Imoinda, the tangled web of court intrigues, and Oroonoko's nobility in battle would all be familiar literary conventions to European readers, although probably less familiar to Behn's African subjects. While it is generally accepted that Behn lived in Suriname at some point, critics are quick to point out that the African courts described by Behn bear a remarkable resemblance to the idealized European courts of romance literature. Some lambaste Behn for this lapse in cultural awareness, while Spengemann's treatment is much more generous: "The point is, rather, that the story of Oroonoko and Imoinda told thus far, being a romance, could happen anywhere without affecting its form one whit." (203) The proper response is probably somewhere in between. Behn wrote for a living, and selling books in the English market of the 17th century usually required using some elements of romance literature. Most likely, she decided to locate the 'juicy parts' of the novel in Africa so that her readers wouldn't recognize their inelegance, and so that romantic cliché wouldn't spoil the documentary authenticity of the second half.

By far, the most interesting aspects of *Oroonoko* are Behn's descriptions of Surinam's climate, landscape and culture. Her lengthy descriptions of its natives, plants, and animals are

exotic yet modest, mimicking the tiny images that colonialists would sketch in the margins of their maps (Lipking xiii). Behn's narrative, like the Brief, True Relations published by explorers of the New World, appealed to the nascent European fascination with foreign lands and cultures. *Oroonoko* is distinguished from many other popular accounts of the New World in that its author had firsthand experience of the place that she wrote about. Behn's claim, "I was my self an Eye-Witness to a great part, of what you will find here set down," (8) is not a mere story hook by her narrator, but also a formal allusion to the day's popular travel narratives, which typically began with the author's assurance that the account was a "Brief, True Relation" of his travels. Some of Behn's descriptions are, of course, borrowed from other sources – "if she made no use of texts, she would have been very nearly alone" (Lipking xiv) – but *Oroonoko* also contains elements that appear in no other contemporary texts. The extent of Behn's travels in Suriname and the originality of her descriptions are complex scholarly topics, but critics generally agree that *Oroonoko* is a valuable and reliable document of British colonialism in South America.

Despite its combination of two popular literary genres, *Oroonoko* did not sell well during Behn's lifetime, instead achieving most of its later success when adapted to the stage. Nor did it significantly influence the development of the novel, as it was ultimately imitated by few later novelists. While the public eventually came to love the character of Oroonoko in the theatre, the book itself has never been widely read, and critical opinion of its quality is lukewarm at best. Nevertheless, *Oroonoko*'s amalgam of genres surprisingly and undeniably anticipates the formal features of the novel, being a lengthy, fictional narrative in prose. Even though *Oroonoko* is not necessarily relevant to American history, it nevertheless has value both as a document of British colonialism, and as a fascinating literary artifact.

Oroonoko's Influence – The Impact of America on Literature

However, the justification that Spengemann considers most important for considering *Oroonoko* the first American novel is that it reflects the first influence of the New World on English literature. Spengemann's thesis claims:

> To enter literature on a truly literary footing, America must make a difference in the way literature is written – which is to say, in its selection, deployment, and arrangement of words. . . . If we can locate, somewhere, a literary work whose form can be attributed directly to the impact of America on the written language, then, no matter where we find it or who wrote it, we can say that we have discovered a literature that deserves to be called American. (200)

It is curious that Spengemann deemphasizes geographical and cultural relatedness in favor of his own purely literary criteria. When he 'discovers' this particular sort of literary work in *Oroonoko*, it's hard not to wonder if Spengemann didn't intentionally shape the criteria he used so as to arrive at this conclusion. But his placement of *Oroonoko* in this role has more important implications:

> . . . *Oroonoko* belongs in the first chapter of any history of American fiction, somewhere between Henry Nevile's *Isle of Pines* (1668) and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). And to say that is to place it at the very source of the English novel – the novel written in English – for, as *Oroonoko* suggests, the peculiar features of that genre have an apparent source in the narrative form through which America made its way into the English language. (Spengemann 208)

The narrative form that he refers to is the Brief, True Relation; which was at least a partial model for all three of the novels that he mentions here. All at once, Spengemann's thesis has

broadened considerably – instead of merely claiming that *Oroonoko* is the first American novel, he also suggests that the Brief, True Relation of the colonial period is a major component of the novel form itself. Such a claim is far too large to examine in this paper, but on the surface, it is at once plausible and compelling.

Conclusion

It appears that Spengemann has accomplished something more than he meant to. From his examination of the fragmented, forgotten *Oroonoko*, Spengemann emerges with an apparently original insight into the origins of the novel. But to return to the thesis of the article – should *Oroonoko* be considered the first American novel, and regarded as such in the literary canon? It seems that the answer is "no." Despite Spengemann's redefinition of American literature, the fact remains that *Oroonoko* bears little historical or cultural significance to the future United States. As a document of the colonial period, it is at least equal to the other extant Brief, True Relations about South American and Caribbean colonialism, although ultimately uninformative about North American colonialism. As a novel, however, *Oroonoko* is a strange, fascinating example of the form in its prototypical stages. Ironically, it seems that *Oroonoko* is worthy of an esteemed position in courses such as "British Colonialism" or "The Early Novel," but does not belong at all in the study of early American literature.

Works Cited

Behn, Aphra. *Oroonoko*, ed. Joanna Lipking. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.

Lipking, Joanna. "Preface." *Oroonoko*, ed. Joanna Lipking. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.

– – –. "The New World of Slavery: An Introduction" *Oroonoko*, ed. Joanna Lipking. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.

Spengemann, William C. "The Earliest American Novel: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*." *Oroonoko*, ed. Joanna Lipking. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.