

# THE REPRESENTATION OF THE OTHER IN APHRA BEHN'S WORKS

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the problem of the representation of the Other, namely, Ottomans and Black people, in Aphra Behn's works. It focuses on her play *The False Count: A New Way to Play an Old Game* (1682) and her novel *Oroonoko, or The History of the Royal Slave* (1688). While *The False Count* is traditional in its stereotypical representation of morals and religion of Ottomans, *Oroonoko* is innovative in its favourable portrayal of a Black person and its criticism of contemporary Christianity. The image of the Turk in *The False Count* conforms with the dominant Eurocentric representational paradigm; the image of the Black, namely, Oroonoko, in Behn's novel undergoes a number of changes and founds a new trend in English literature —an abolitionist one.

KEY WORDS: Other, religion, Eurocentricity, Aphra Behn.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo trata del problema de la representación del Otro, concretamente, de los otomanos y de los negros, en la obra de Aphra Behn. Se centra en su pieza *False Count: A New Way to Play an Old Game* (1682) y su novela *Oroonoko, or The History of the Royal Slave* (1688). Mientras que *The False Count* es tradicional en su representación estereotípica de la moral y la religión de los otomanos, *Oroonoko* se muestra innovadora en la representación favorable de la persona de raza negra y de su crítica al cristianismo contemporáneo. La imagen del turco en *The False Count* se ajusta al paradigma dominante representativo de la Europa Central; la imagen de los negros en la novela de Behn, a saber, Oroonoko, experimenta una serie de cambios y origina una nueva tendencia —abolicionista— en la literatura inglesa.

PALABRAS CLAVE: el Otro, religión, eurocentricidad, Aphra Behn.

## INTRODUCTION

Not once can we meet non-English characters, including Oriental and Black people in seventeenth-century English literature. England at that time maintained strong contacts with other countries and invited ambassadors even from distant





lands such as Russia, which was considered an Eastern country in the seventeenth century, and Turkey, still a great and powerful empire in the Mediterranean region.

Construction of the great literary edifice on the Ottoman Empire in the Elizabethan and Stuart periods is an indication that the interest in the doings of the Turks was intense. Considering that more than thirty extant plays were written about the Turks between 1580 and 1642, it is clear that England like all the leading states in Europe, took into account the Ottoman Empire from an aesthetic as well as diplomatic and economic points of view. In the popular imagination, the Ottoman Sultan was perceived as an absolute ruler whose tyranny, licentiousness and oppression over women were presented against the rational, civilized European. In essence, the distorted image of the Turk in literature contributed to the staking out in the cultural difference a privileged place to assume Western superiority.

In seventeenth-century England we see the rise of women writers; as Janet Todd said, Restoration (1660-1688) was “the first period in which they had entered culture as public women of letters.”<sup>1</sup> One of the most brilliant and most important English women writers of the period was Aphra Behn (1640-1689), generally considered the first woman to become a professional writer in her country.

Any woman writer was an “Other” to the representatives of the male-dominated literary world. But for an English woman, as well as for an English man, a non-English person was also an “Other.” How did Aphra Behn as a woman writer present images of Oriental and Black people in her drama and prose? Did her position as the “Other” among male writers impact somehow her representation of Oriental and Black characters? This question is a very complicated one. If we take Behn’s works as a unity, we can easily see she used both traditional and innovative approaches, dealing with the problem of the Other. In this article we are going to illuminate both aspects, using as examples her play *The False Count: A New Way to Play an Old Game* (1682) and her novel *Oroonoko, or The History of the Royal Slave* (1688).

## 1. “OTTOMANS” IN *THE FALSE COUNT*

*The False Count*, staged before the King in autumn 1681, was based in part on Molière’s *Précieuses Ridicules* (1659), which was more than a satire about “ridiculous” women. It explored debates surrounding the “law” in an intensely patriarchal society. As a commentary on the gendered component of literary politics and social power struggles, Molière’s comedy dealt with conflict in ideological and political order in the seventeenth-century France. In Molière’s comedy the voice of the father pronounces the condemnation of this “topsy-turvy world” in an aside addressed to the audience: “And you who are the cause of their folly, your back-

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Todd, *Gender, Art and Death* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993) 17.

brained absurdities, pernicious pasttimes of idle minds, novels, verses, songs, sonnets and moonnets, may the devil take you all.”<sup>2</sup>

Behn’s “slight farce,” as Elizabeth Barry announced in the “Epilogue,” had a satirical structure like Molière’s play. As for *The False Count*, however, comically and critically it targeted forced marriages. Behn portrayed the play’s heroine Julia as a victim of forced marriage, the foolish and proprietorial old husband Fransisco got punished with an elaborate and humiliating trick. In the play not only was Fransisco made a cuckold, but he was also duped into giving Julia to the man he thought was the Turkish sultan. In other words, the trick involved manning a galley, which had been captured by some forty/fifty men disguised as the “ferocious Turks.” According to the plan Fransisco and his entourage would be made “slaves” and would be taken to a fine villa, which they would pretend to be a seraglio belonging to the Grand Seignior where he amused himself with his “She Slaves.” When the so-called Turks would begin to terrorize the Christians on board, Fransisco would insist that he was no Christian but a devout Heathen. Obviously, the ruse would be exposed in the final scene, and with the union of Julia with Don Carlos, the Governor of Cadiz the play would validate a relationship based on the mutual affection and consent.

As she pronounced in her “Epilogue” to *The False Count* Behn had been able to bring “forth with ease” this play about “fair slaves” and “ferocious Turks” as “one wish at the devil” in just “five days.”<sup>3</sup> This is not surprising considering that in *The False Count* Behn’s plot, the stage device, the rhetoric and perceptions about the Other (in this case the Ottoman Turks) were all established by her predecessors. Like so many of her contemporaries Behn borrowed extensively from seventeenth-century European playwrights. Her play employed most of the comic conventions of Restoration theatre with its sexual connotations prevalent in the comedies of the age. Since Restoration comedy had turned to promiscuity as its major theme, Behn’s work conformed to the conventions of masculine privilege and power as revealed in the works of her colleagues Rochester, Wycherley and Etherege. Moreover, as a Western writer, in her construction of the Other, Behn acted on a set of values and authority shaped by political, religious and discursive conditions, which were all passed on to her from her predecessors. In other words, as revealed from *The False Count*, when Behn sought to make a career on the Restoration stage through her pen, the Ottoman milieu as a dramatic setting had already provided for the English audiences a common experience of an imaginative encounter with the Other. In that sense, Behn’s comedy disclosed an ideology what was homogeneous and all-encompassing in its negative portrayal of the Ottoman Turks on the English stage. When it

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<sup>2</sup> Molière, *Tartuffe: And Other Plays*, trans. and introd. Donald M. Frame (New York: New American Library, 1967) 47.

<sup>3</sup> Aphra Behn, *The Works of Aphra Behn*, 6 vols., ed. Montague Summers, 1915. Reprint. Vol. 3 (New York: Phaeton, 1967) Act III scene 1. All the references to this edition are with the indication of the number of the act and scene.

came to Behn's choice of an Ottoman Sultan for her "masquerade," the Orient or Oriental as a mode of representation was canonical. As Edward Said puts it:

It had been employed by Chaucer and Mandeville, by Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope and Byron. It designated Asia and the East, geographically, morally and culturally. One could speak in Europe of an Oriental personality, an Oriental atmosphere, an Oriental tale, Oriental despotism or an Oriental mode of production, and be understood.<sup>4</sup>

When Behn joined her male counterparts who had paved the way in creating a theatrical experience with the audiences through the fantastical images of the Turk, she was fast in claiming an authority which allowed her to "speak" as a Turk, in place of the Turk, in the name of a Turk, for the Turk, or against the Turk:

*Francisco:* Oh Lord, *Turk, Turks!*

*Guiliom:* *Turks*, oh, is that all?

*Francisco:* All -why they'll make Eunuchs of us, my Lord, Eunuchs of us poor men, and lie with our wives. (IV. i)

...

*Guiliom:* Why where be these *Turks*? Set me to 'em, I'll make 'em smoke, Dogs...

*Isabella:* Oh, the Insolence of these *Turks!*

...

*Enter some Turks with the body of Francisco in chains and lay him down on a Bank.*

*Fran:* The Great Turk, —the Great Devil, why, where am I, Friend?

*I Turk:* Within the Territories of the Grand Seignior, and this is a Palace of Pleasure, where he recreates himself with his Mistresses. (IV. ii)

Written at a time a female author was vilified as a whore, *The False Count* formulated a conflicting alliance between conventional representations of gender and Behn's own subversive style. In its portrayal of otherness and difference, however, Behn's play revived images of representational practices of Western authority. When Behn incorporated a seraglio masquerade into her comedy, the harem as the paradigm and the locus of the Other was already conceptualized and defined by her male predecessors. The masquerade as an imaginary mode of representation was in essence a cultural apparatus designed for purely strategic ends for the judgment of unfamiliarity and difference of the Other. Molière, through a similar masquerade in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670) had already displayed an imaginary encounter between the two opposing paradigms of culture and had ridiculed difference at a variety of levels from the perspective of a superior culture. French playwrights, as it is generally known, were great models for the English dramatists.

Yet, as her orientalist discourse revealed an ideological affirmation and superiority of Western values, the "morality" and customs of the Ottomans also made

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1985) 31.



them an easy target for Behn. Since satire demanded that the audience be aware of two or more levels of discourse, *The False Count* through its sexually and racially aggressive language entertained the patriarchal structure of oppression and women's ambition for power through characters who "ventured life, liberty and wife to the mercy of the Heathen Turks...damned infidels" (iv. ii). On the one hand, Behn's obscene and racist language such as "Oh, damn'd circumcised *Turk*" or "Why, you're a *Mahometan Bitch*" (iv. ii) threatened the moral aspect of a "satirical gesture" which had to be "essentially conservative."<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the comic image of the Turk as "his Monstrousness," his "Barbarousness" fit into the parameters of a satire which operated by isolating and ridiculing some sort of abnormality and deviation. The comic effect in *The False Count* arose purely from the characters' disguise as Turks who terrorized the Christians on board. In the play, not only did Behn make the Turk the butt of her farcical fantasies, but she also ridiculed and severely satirized the Other's morality, religion and customs since they were perceived as deviations from the shared norms and standards of her audience. Ironically though, despite the stereotyped representations of the sultan's palace coloured with vivid images an unrestrained sensuality, it was not different from any aristocratic household in Britain at the time with the figure of libertine or a rake standing for a polygamous husband. As for the masquerade, in the seventeenth century social and moral context, it had connotations of sexual license as well as defying hierarchies. As Lisa Lowe indicates: "In English the concept of masquerade, disguises afforded an anonymity that permitted sexual and social promiscuity. Masked ladies could take lovers, courtiers could pretend to be peasants."<sup>6</sup>

In her comedy, drawn from a reservoir of ready types and plots, when Behn turned Antonio's fine villa into a pretense Seraglio (belonging to the Grand Seignior) where the "Tyrant" would regale himself with his "She-Slaves," Isabella also became the butt of the satirical joke. Although Guzman's project was to make the old wretch Fransisco a cuckold, it was his daughter Isabella, who was excited with the idea of being ravished by the Grand Turk and fascinated with the thought of being the "Queen of Turkey." Since Isabella's resolution was that "none should ravish (her) but the great Turk," she gave Guzman a jewel so that he would recommend her "to be first served up to the Grand Seignior" (iv.ii). Considering that Behn predicted a whole new spectrum of possibilities for her sex, perhaps Isabella's enthusiasm to serve the sultan was packed not so much an allusion to her own violation of her modesty as it was a call for freedom of choice of mental partner. It was evident that Behn had transgressed the boundaries of the masculine and feminine spheres of her society through a kind of revolution. If the public exposure of her own work had revealed what ought to be hidden, ultimately the veiling and unveiling of Julia, Clara, Isabella and Jacinta through a masquerade in Act IV Scene

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<sup>5</sup> Pat Gill, *Interpreting Ladies: Women Wit and Morality in Restoration Comedy of Manners* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1994) 156.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains, French and British Orientalists* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991) 46.



It had a direct link with the social hegemony of modesty, which controlled women. Behn, who like her literary colleagues Wycherley and Etherege wrote plays that dealt openly with sexual topics, had no qualms about openly violating the essential element of her gender - that is her modesty. Ultimately, if Isabella, with her misguided behaviour, was a foil for Behn, she also represented the “increasingly vulnerable and contingent position of women”<sup>7</sup> in the seventeenth century. Ironically, while in *The False Count* Behn eroticized the Ottomans through images of the harem and ridiculed the shallowness of Isabella’s ambitious desire to be the “She Great Turk,” as a woman writing in this era and exposing herself to the world, she herself had already taken a similar risk.

A work of a European dramatist (since Behn shared a common perspective on the representation of the Other on the English stage), *False Count* conformed to the image of the Turk constructed within the dominant Eurocentric representational paradigm. As this play indicates, her Western values and perceptions of the Other reflected the psyche of her society and were rooted in literary history.

## 2. THE BLACK PEOPLE: CHANGING IDENTITY OF OROONOKO IN APHRA BEHN’S NOVEL

Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko, or The History of the Royal Slave* (1688) holds a unique place in English literature of the Restoration period. It is a rare work, which presents an African man in a positive way. Moreover, it is a rare work, which shows an African at all. Behn herself created an image of a Moor in her tragedy *Abdelazer* (1677), but there the connection between a black man and a white woman is a threat. As for the prose writings of the period, Henry Neville’s *Isle of Pines* (1668) should be mentioned as another example of the negative attitude to black people based among other sources on the biblical representation of Hanaan folk (children of the black woman-servant and their role in the colony). Behn in her *Oroonoko* changes this line.

She also changes the line established in her earlier works. If we take the above-mentioned *False Count*, we clearly see that there the Other was different —Oriental— and inferior. The pseudo Turks were stereotyped Oriental people with the traces of English libertines. In *Oroonoko* she modifies, if not completely changes, her representation of the Other. As Tzvetan Todorov argues in *The Conquest of America*, we discover the Other in the Self because we are not a homogeneous substance radically alien to whatever we perceive is not us.<sup>8</sup> It is by referring to Arthur Rimbaud’s famous epiphany “je suis un autre” that Todorov unfolds the I

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<sup>7</sup> Angeline Goreau, “Aphra Behn: A Scandal to Modesty,” *Feminist Theorists: Three Centuries of Key Women Thinkers*, ed. Dale Spenser (New York: Pantheon, 1983): 11.

<sup>8</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper and Row, 1984) 3.

and the Other dynamic. Like Columbus Behn's narrator chooses to imagine the Other as equal and to some degree identical, not absolutely different and therefore inferior.

As we have already mentioned, one can find a few black people among characters of seventeenth-century English literature. The first in the line is of course Othello, but the social and political situation had changed a lot since Shakespearean times and introduced new problems. England had risen as a colonial power since the beginning of the seventeenth century and had occupied the former place of Spain and Portugal. The scholars noticed that slave trade had become more intensive since 1626, and between 1680 and 1760 some 2 million black slaves were forcibly transported across an ocean to produce massive new work force in the English colonies of the West Indies only.<sup>9</sup> The slave trade was largest in history at that period.

The treatment of slaves in English colonies was often quite cruel. By the 1680's there had been acquired enough real life material to put the question of the attitude to slaves in print. A mystic, healer and vegetarian Thomas Tryon drew attention of his contemporaries to this problem in his books *A Dialogue Between an East-Indian Brackmanny or Heathen Philosopher and a French Gentleman Concerning the Present State of Affairs of Europe* (1683) and *Friendly Advice to the Gentlemen-Planters of the East and West Indies* (1684).

Thomas Tryon (1634-1703) was himself a merchant who in the 1660's spent several years in Barbadoes. He traded in beavers, and his business prospered. In 1669 he returned to England and "at 48 years of age... felt an "inward urge" to write against violence to men and animals."<sup>10</sup> In his *Friendly Advice* he included a plea for a more human treatment of Negro slaves. The very titles of the second and third part of this work talk for themselves: "The Negro's Complaint of Their Hard Servitude and the Cruelties Practiced upon them By divers of their Masters professing Christianity in the West Indian Plantations" and "A Discourse in Way of Dialogue Between an Ethiopian or Negro-Slave and a Christian that was his Master in America." Tryon unmasques the pretensions of Christians to humanitarianism.

Aphra Behn was acquainted with Tryon and his works. She addressed to him one of her poems and was probably his personal friend. It has been established that *Friendly Advice* had influenced her *Oroonoko* in points of humanitarian ideas of the novel.

As for slave rebellions, those happened quite often in the West Indies, some of them led by women. There has not been found a precise prototype of Oroonoko

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<sup>9</sup> Svetlana A. Vatchenko, *U istokov anglijskogo antikolonialistkogo romana: tvorcheskije poiski Aphri Behn v romanicheskoj proze* (Kiev: Naukova Dumka, 1984) 145.

<sup>10</sup> R.T. Sheffey, "Some Evidence for a New Source of Aphra Behn's "Oroonoko," *Studies in Philology* 59.1 (1962): 54. See more about Thomas Tryon and Aphra Behn in Bernard Dhuicq, "Survie des themes millenaristes dans l'oeuvre d'Aphra Behn (1640-1689)," *Formes du Millenarisme en Europe a l'aube des temps modernes: Actes du Colloque international*. (Paris: Hon. Champion, 2001) 357.



yet, but there is a strong impression that genuine historical events provided a basis for Aphra Behn's novel.

*Oroonoko* has been the subject of many critical writings for the last thirty years. A lot of scholars established the link between racial and gender issues in this novel. Probably, the most famous article on the subject is Laura Brown's "The Romance of Empire: Oroonoko and the Trade in Slaves" (1987), where the tension between the aristocratic ideology and the ideology of the noble savagery is examined and much is said about the point of reference—a figure of the woman. For Brown, Oroonoko is a natural European and aristocrat, as well as a natural neoclassicist and Royalist, and Behn can't see beyond the mirror of her own culture.<sup>11</sup> Oroonoko also becomes a figure for Stuart royalty, and there exist some interpretations of his image in political terms: he becomes a metaphoric representation either of Charles I or of James II. Although Aphra Behn could have had in mind the fate of Stuart kings while writing her novel, such interpretations seem quite artificial. We would like to trace the changes in Oroonoko's identity basing on Aphra Behn's text.

In her "Epistle Dedicatory" to the novel Behn calls her hero "A Man Gallant enough" and "The Royal Slave," emphasizing his double nature: a direct "descendant" of the characters of heroic romances and a figure founding a new tradition in literature: that of literary works dedicated to the fate of Africans in slavery.<sup>12</sup> In the exposition to the novel she claims that her "Hero" is not a feign'd one, but a real one, a part of whose adventures she was a witness of (*Or* 8). She calls him a "great man," placing him (still nameless) into the tradition of heroic romances. When she finally introduces Oroonoko (after discussing the lifestyle of South American Indians and the trade in slaves) he appears as a youth of seventeen, "one of the most expert Captains, and bravest Soldiers, that ever saw the Field of Mars," "the Wonder of all that World, and the Darling of the Soldiers" (*Or* 12). Here we can see one of his most important characteristic features, that of a military man. But a bit later the narrator mentions also his capability of "Love and Gallantry"—another important feature of a hero of romances. But at this point Behn includes an important explanation of Oroonoko's uniqueness: he is brought up by a "French-Man of Wit and Learning," who taught him "Morals, Language and Science," and Oroonoko also knew some "English Gentlemen that traded thither" and "Spaniards" (*Or* 12-13). This "French-Man" is quite underestimated by Behn scholars. They generally mention him, but his role in the novel is rarely analyzed. Nevertheless, it is with him that Oroonoko appears on an English slave ship, and then comes to Surinam. It is this French tutor, a "Heretic" in his own country and "a Man of very little Religion," who "infused into his young Pupil" critical attitude to Christianity, re-

<sup>11</sup> Laura Brown, "The Romance of Empire: Oroonoko and the Trade in Slaves," *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, ed. F. Nissbaum & L. Brown (New York: Methuen, 1987) 41-62.

<sup>12</sup> Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko*, ed. Joanna Lipking (New York: Norton, 1997) 7. All the subsequent references to this edition as *Or*.





jection of the notion of Trinity and of faith itself. Later in the novel Oroonoko will be not only a gallant hero of a romance, but also a freethinker, anticipating the characters of the eighteenth-century novels, especially the French ones (Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes* (1721) etc.). Here Behn shifts from the ideology of heroic romances, the aristocratic ideology, to the ideology of the oncoming Enlightenment period.<sup>13</sup>

It is the first meeting with Oroonoko described by the narrator where his “otherness” is finally emphasized. It is his blackness: “The whole Proportion and Air of his Face was so noble, and exactly form’d, that, bating his Colour, there cou’d be nothing in Nature more beautiful, agreeable and handsome” (*Or* 13). Oroonoko’s beauty is a classical one, and he is as wise “as any Prince civiliz’d in the most refin’d Schools of Humanity and Learning” (*Or* 14), but he is black, and, therefore, the “Other.” The Restoration period didn’t see such racist theories of the superiority of one race over the others as Gobineau’s one (his *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (1853-55) influenced Hitler), but the fearful and disgusting attitude to black people had already dominated. Behn is quite explicit in her novel: “And who-ever had heard him speak, wou’d have been convinc’d of their Errors, that all fine Wit is confin’d to the White Men, especially those of Christendom” (*Or* 14).

Throughout the whole text of the novel Behn tries to destabilize this point, to draw her readers’ attention to the fact that honour and good qualities may be held by a person of any colour. Some scholars consider she failed, and her sentimentalism as well as her inclination to europeanize Black people even intensified negative attitudes toward Africans.<sup>14</sup> It should be emphasized that Behn’s inclination to europeanize Oroonoko seemingly arises not only out of her inability to see beyond her own culture and to create a real “Other,” but also out of the intellectual climate of seventeenth-century England. Seventeenth-century English thinkers promoted the idea of cosmopolitanism and universalism, which reflected most explicitly in the numerous projects of universal languages.<sup>15</sup> They were interested in different cultures, but tried to find a unifying principle, based on European culture. Nevertheless, it is incorrect to say that Aphra Behn didn’t understand the relativity of people’s ideas of beauty and thought there is only one idea of it —the European one. In her “Translator’s Preface” to “A Discovery of the New Worlds” (her translation of B.B. de Fontenelle’s *Entretiens sur la Pluralité des Mondes*, 1688) she makes an important statement: “And I do not say this so much, to condemn the French, as to praise our own Mother-tongue, for what we think a Deformity, they may think

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<sup>13</sup> Derek Hughes thinks Oroonoko’s non-belief in the Trinity is also a mark of the primitive. He also thinks that Behn modelled her French tutor on Fontenelle, but this is unlikely, as Fontenelle was not banished out of France for some “heretical notions.” See Derek Hughes, “Oroonoko: The Editor and the Marketplace,” *Aphra Behn (1640-1689): le modèle européen*, ed. Mary Ann O’Donnell & Bernard Dhuicq (Entrevaux: Bilingua GA, 2005) 159.

<sup>14</sup> Moira Ferguson, “*Oroonoko*: Birth of a Paradigm,” *New Literary History* 23.2 (Spring 1992): 339-359.

<sup>15</sup> See Violetta Trofimova, “Crossing the Boundaries: Aphra Behn and John Wilkins Popularizing the “New Science”,” *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 50 (Abril 2005): 87-100.



a Perfection, as the Negroes of Guinney think us as ugly, as we think them.”<sup>16</sup> This quotation shows that Aphra Behn admitted that there could exist different standards of beauty not only for people, but for languages too.

Oroonoko’s blackness is in Aphra Behn’s opinion even a positive aesthetic value. His gleaming blackness shines through all. He is even blacker than his countrymen, he is marvelously black. He is different not only from white people, but also from other Africans, and holds a unique place in the novel.

Before falling into the hands of a slave trader, Oroonoko went through the conflict of love and duty, choosing, as a hero of classical tragedies, duty and avoiding any dishonourable deeds. He loses his beloved Imoinda and then loses his freedom.

The ambiguity of *Oroonoko* also arises from different settings of the novel. In the first part of it Oroonoko acts as a gallant hero, a neoclassicist in an Oriental world with perpetual battles between different princes, harems, trade in slaves etc. For a long time this part had been considered fictitious, but a Nigerian-born playwright Biyi Bandele disproved this idea, choosing the African part of Oroonoko for his play (Biyi Bandele, *Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko in a New Adaptation*, 1999).

The setting for the second part is a colony of Surinam, which Aphra Behn visited in 1663–64, and this part seems much more “realistic” than the previous one. This “realism” is certainly not the classical realism of the nineteenth-century literature, but just a faithful depiction of the environment and the relationships between people. This part, so much different from the first one, introduces the new problem —slavery. It is the Western slave economy that Oroonoko gets his identity as the African Other from. Although he is a royal prince, he is turned into property that can be owned and traded.

Oroonoko remains a gallant man, but also shows himself a freethinker in philosophical disputes with a fictitious Behn. Being a Black and a slave, he tries to spend more time with the white women. This is a fact often discussed by scholars. In the second part the reader also finds the third nation —American Indians. Oroonoko travels with the English people to meet the Indian tribe, and his position is closer to white people than to native Americans, but, at the same time, he respects Indians. His role is that of a mediator between two other cultures. But soon this apparent calmness vanishes. Oroonoko —named Caesar in Surinam— assumes a new role —that of a leader of a slave rebellion. He even makes a protoabolitionist speech: “And why, said he, my dear Friends and Fellow-sufferers, should we be Slaves to an unknown People? Have they Vanquish’d us Nobly in Fight?... no, but we are Bought and Sold like Apes, or Monkeys, to be the Sport of Women, Fools and Cowards...” (*Or* 52). He plans to found a new colony, but the rebellion is defeated. There is an opinion that Oroonoko is “the prototype

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<sup>16</sup> Aphra Behn, “Translator’s Preface,” *A Discovery of New Worlds: From the French* (London: William Canning, 1688) n. pag.

of a colonized subject, the Third World bourgeoisie of modern times.”<sup>17</sup> He is also the prototype of the leaders of rebellions in the Third World, many of whom were educated in Europe and had a deep knowledge of European culture. Although, it may not be true for the 17th century.

It is interesting that Aphra Behn as a narrator does not elaborate on the evils of slavery and never talks about the slavery institution itself. But it is significant that she found a way to criticize the Western slavery institution by making her protagonist, who suffered from it, talk about it and condemn it. Oroonoko used to sell captives of war as slaves while living in Africa. He even tries to bargain his freedom in exchange of sending slaves in the future. But Oroonoko also makes a clear distinction between the slavery institution in Africa, where people are turned into slaves when captured in battles, and the slavery institution in the West, where people become slaves not only by force used in the fight, but also by treachery. He points out the purely commercial side of Western slave trade. As for Aphra Behn, she felt very uneasy at the growth of commercialization of all sides of English life in her time and condemned love of money in her drama, poetry and prose.

At the end of the novel we see again Oroonoko as a hero of a tragedy, meeting a “good death,” a noble death of a “great man.” Though all the outward changes he has a good amount of inner stability. Despite the enslavement he remains “royal” —a “man of quality” until his heroic self-sacrifice in the end. Behn was fascinated by “beautiful” spectacles of glorious deaths, and she could see several examples of them in London of the 1680’s.

In Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* the main hero undergoes a change from a Europeanized “other,” a gallant Black prince, to a slave freethinker, a leader of a slave rebellion and again a “Hero,” a “great man.” These changes reflect the instability of the ideology of this novel: the aristocratic ideology of a romance, the ideology of the oncoming Enlightenment, the developing ideology of the slaves fighting for freedom —the protoabolitionist element. It is this ambiguity of *Oroonoko* and its hero that makes this novel interesting for scholars, readers and creative writers of our days.

## CONCLUSION

Aphra Behn was an ambiguous person and ambiguous writer, and this ambiguity was reflected in her drama and prose works. As an English woman writer, she had an inherited set of ideas about other people. It is especially explicit in her treatment of Oriental people, namely, Turks, whom she considered inferior to European people, especially in religion and culture. Since it was the harem that stood

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<sup>17</sup> Qtd. Oddvar Holmesland, “In Search of a Restorative New World: *Oroonoko* and *The Widow Ranter*,” *Revisiting and Reinterpreting Aphra Behn*, ed. Margarete Rubik, Jorge Figueroa-Dorrego, & Bernard Dhucq (Entrevaux: Bilingua GA, 2003) 28 note 10.

for the opacity marking radical difference, Behn in *The False Count* created an imaginary locus to affirm Occidental superiority. As for her representation of Black people, it was based on her humanitarian ideas about the treatment of slaves, which coincided with the opinion of her friend Thomas Tryon.

We can speak at the same time about Aphra Behn's authorial voice, following Said, for whom author is the source, origin and meaning of the text,<sup>18</sup> and her text as "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture," as Roland Barthes claimed in his "Death of Author."<sup>19</sup> Her emerging authorial voice in *The False Count* was already inherent in the dominant culture of Western society. The narrative structure of *Oroonoko* is a complex one, with at least two levels of narrator. Aphra Behn-author and a fictive Aphra Behn-character of the novel are two different people with different ideas about the world and its values. Oroonoko as the hero of the novel is as close to Aphra Behn-author as the fictive Behn. She makes him unfold her criticism of the institution of slavery and of the hypocrisy of Christian civilization —too radical topics to be discussed by fictive Behn. While *The False Count* is traditional in its stereotypical representation of moral and customs of Ottomans, *Oroonoko* is innovative in its praise of "the state of innocence," its positive portrayal of a Black person and its negative attitude to contemporary Christianity.

The eighteenth-century literature didn't see the original representation of Ottomans, but not because of the negative attitude to the Other, but because of the orientation to the universal principles of reason sprung out of European culture. The very paradigm of the representation of the Ottomans changed, and the Grand Turk was even shown a benevolent ruler.

As for a Black slave fighting for freedom, Oroonoko probably remained the most original character in seventeenth-eighteenth century English literature. Behn's novel gave birth to a number of plays based on *Oroonoko*, which were made explicitly abolitionist in the end.<sup>20</sup> 100 years after Behn wrote her novel the first society for the abolition of slave trade was founded and hundreds of petitions were made against the slave trade.

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<sup>18</sup> Edward Said, *Beginnings* (New York: Basic, 1975) 83.

<sup>19</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text*. ed. and trans. Heath Stephen (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977) 146.

<sup>20</sup> See more Joyce Green MacDonald, "The Disappearing African Woman: Imoinda in *Oroonoko* after Behn," *English Literary History* 66.1 (1999): 71-86.