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Title: The Narrator in *Oroonoko*

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[In the following essay, Brownley discusses Behn's handling of the narrator in *Oroonoko*, asserting that the narrative persona is used “to unify and to add realism to disparate elements” in the novel.]

In the past the narrator of***Oroonoko*** has, with very few exceptions, been studied mainly in terms of the life and ideas of Aphra Behn. Since what little we know of Behn's life is just as exciting and romantic as any material in her writings, it is easy to see why the narrative *persona* of ***Oroonoko*** has taken second place to the woman who was traveler, spy, pioneer female author, and political intriguer For the moment controversy over Behn's biography seems to have died down. Undoubtedly the lull is temporary, for many fascinating questions remain unanswered. Nevertheless, the pause offers a useful chance to consider the role of the narrator within the context of the novel itself. ***Oroonoko's*** importance in early English prose fiction has long been established, and, as George Guffey points out [in his *Two English Novelists*. 1975] the “particularly well-defined narrator” is one important element which distinguishes the work from other fiction of the time. Functioning as a strongly felt presence throughout ***Oroonoko***, the narrator unifies the novel, enhances the tenuous realism of the basically heroic story, and offers a viable standard of judgment for the readers.

Since in general what the narrator says is more important than anything she actually does in the context of the story of ***Oroonoko***, narrative control of language emerges as one of her most important functions. Other than the character of Oroonoko himself, the voice of the narrator is the major unifying element in the novel. Behn carefully develops a distinctive voice for her narrative *persona*; in ***Oroonoko*** the contrast of realism and romanticism in the narrator's expression gives the style its unique quality. This contrast in style, of course, reflects the uneasy alliance in ***Oroonoko*** of romantic elements from the heroic play and realistic elements later prominent in the novel. The synthesis is not entirely successful, but Behn's manipulation of the narrator's romantic and realistic styles to control point of view accounts for some of the success that she managed to achieve in ***Oroonoko***.

The romantic element is apparent in the narrator's eloquent-style, found particularly in the elaborate rhetorical speeches which reflect Behn's dramatic background. The overstatement and hackneyed imagery typical of the heroic play also occur, as one would expect, whenever narrator or characters speak of love. When Oroonoko faces separation from Imoinda by military duty, “every Day seem'd a tedious Year till he saw his *Imoinda*”; after their reunion in Surinam, the lovers agree that “even Fetters and Slavery were soft and easy, and would be supported with Joy and Pleasure; while they cou'd be so happy to possess each other”. The narrator pulls out all the stops in her heroic description of Oroonoko's appearance, which abounds in superlatives. His shape is “the most exact that can be fancy'd”; his mouth is “the finest shaped that could be seen”; he has “the best Grace in the World.” She combines the best of nature and of art to depict him: “The most famous Statuary cou'd not form the Figure of a Man more admirably turn'd from head to foot,” while “bating his Colour, there could be Nothing in Nature more beautiful, agreeable, and handsome” than his face. Having exhausted superlatives in describing Oroonoko, she can only do justice to Imoinda's charms by calling her a fit consort for Oroonoko, “the beautiful Black *Venus* to our young *Mars*”. With one exception, the hyperbolic heroic style is always used in connection with Oroonoko and his activities. Only Oroonoko's execution, when he is finally destroyed by men who cannot tolerate what he represents, is described in realistic terms. In this passage the straight-forward language heightens Oroonoko's heroic actions by the narrator's grimly effective contrast of style and content. Through the rest of the novel, the heroic style sets him apart within the narrative just as his ideal love, truth, and honor separate him from the ordinary standards of those around him.

***Oroonoko*** is at least partially the story of these ordinary people and their reaction to the extraordinary. Neither these people nor the narrator herself could be appropriately delineated in heroic terms, and so realistic colloquial elements are a part of the narrative style. This informal oral style suggests Behn's contemporary reputation as a witty and enjoyable conversationalist. The narrative is filled with conversational insertions: “I had forgot to tell you”; “as I said before”; “I must say thus much.” Using this style, the narrator adds realism by infusing her own personality into the narrative, enhancing the story with her own experiences—“I have seen'em [the Blacks] so frequently blush, and look pale”—and her personal opinions—“For my part, I took'em for Hobgoblins, or Fiends, rather than Men.” To modern tastes, this realistic element is the most familiar and pleasing aspect of the style in ***Oroonoko***. Unfortunately, though the oral style adds realism and is most effective at times, the colloquial narrative is too often difficult to follow. Poorly structured sentences, the mixing of verb tenses, and especially pronouns with ambiguous references hinder the reader's understanding of the action. The clumsiness can be defended, just as Defoe's similar carelessness has been, by suggesting that the author intended the grammatical mistakes to characterize the narrator's mind and outlook. In both cases any gain in characterization would seem to be more than offset by the reader's confusion. The speed at which Behn and Defoe were known to produce also seems to indicate that authorial carelessness rather than deliberate artistry in characterization caused the stylistic problems. That Behn managed in any way to fuse the realistic and the romantic styles in ***Oroonoko*** is an achievement of sorts. The effectiveness of the narrative voice unifies the disparate elements and appropriately focuses point of view. But style cannot finally account either for Behn's success in ***Oroonoko***, or for her purposes in delineating the narrator.

Despite its inadequacy, the fact that the realistic style is present at all in ***Oroonoko*** leads us to the major function of the narrator. It is she who grounds the improbable romantic story in at least a semblance of reality. Very view of the other elements in the novel provide realism. The action, with its fantastic coincidences, noble posturings, and terrible catastrophes, is straight from the pure romance of heroic drama. Behn had chosen backgrounds which would arouse interest; Coramentien provides the remote and glamorous setting typical of a heroic play, while Surinam combines similar exoticism with the topicality appealing to a public eager for information about the colonies in America. Horace Walpole, writing in the middle of the next century, indicates that because of the West-Indian War, “I read nothing but American voyages, and histories of plantations and settlements,” but even in times of peace Europeans enthusiastically devoured accounts of the new world. Although the African background is not portrayed realistically in any way, the descriptions of Surinam may well have seemed realistic enough to a public accustomed to paradisiacal accounts of the newly discovered hemisphere. Today, despite establishment of Behn's accuracy in describing parts of the background, the Edenic fantasy in too many of her descriptions makes the locale seem just as romantically unreal as the actions.

The characters of ***Oroonoko*** are in general no more realistic than the action and setting of the novel. Most of the characters in the story are described in exaggerated terms, emerging as excessively good or extraordinarily bad. Practically everyone in the novel is exceptional: Oroonoko and Imoinda are of course perfect; the Council “consisted of such notorious Villains as *Newgate* never transported”; Aboan is “not only one of the best Quality, but a man extremely well made and beautiful”; Banister is “a Fellow of Absolute Barbarity”. Even the somewhat colorless Trefy is described as “a Man of Great Wit, and fine Learning,” and “a Man of so excellent Wit and Parts”. Only the narrator emerges as rather ordinary. Of her own characteristics, she heavily emphasizes only her credibility, obviously performing the standard obeisance to the antifictional bias of the age. She devotes the first two paragraphs of the story to establishing her reliability in the narrative role, assuring the reader of the literal truth of her tale and the trustworthiness of her sources. Astutely flattering her audience, she emphasizes her conscientiousness as a narrator; she is in complete control of her material and recognizes her obligations not to tell anything which “might prove tedious and heavy to my Reader, in a World where he finds Diversions for every Minute, new and strange”. During the rest of the novel she establishes a pleasant enough narrative presence. Her most important trait is her fundamental decency and humanity, apparent in all of her actions and remarks. Critics note that she does try to emphasize her own importance whenever possible, but despite her insistence on her position, neither her remarks nor her actions establish her as an unusual person. No reader would characterize the narrator in the glowing terms she uses to describe the other characters in the story; she emerges as a character with whom the reader finds it easy enough to identify. Throughout the novel the narrator seems to be an ordinary woman in an extraordinary position, and she therefore adds a sense of realism lacking in the action, setting, and other characters in the story.

Thus in a strange and exotic world of romantic wonders, the narrator helps the reader to keep his bearings. She adds realism to the story, offering a standard of normalcy in an environment of extraordinary people and actions. As such, she can fulfill her other important narrative function, which is to provide an acceptable standard of judgment in ordinary terms for the events and characters in ***Oroonoko***. Oroonoko himself of course provides the noblest example of human excellencies in the novel, but he is ideal rather than real. As Lore Metzger points out, Oroonoko's “heroic ideals cannot prevail in the real world [introduction to ***Oroonoko***, 1973 ed.]. The novel requires standards in ordinary as well as ideal terms, and the narrator, a decent, average woman, can focus the scale of values in the realistic terms required. As a participant in the story she several times serves as a link between Oroonoko and the European world, and in the novel she interprets him to this world. It is her standards which finally emerge as most interesting to the reader, because of their possible applicability to his own experience.

The narrator provides standards of judgment at several levels for her audience. At the lowest level, she seeks to make the unusual comprehensible to her English audience by comparisons with things familiar to them. The Amazon is “almost as broad as the River of Thames”; the Indian stools are painted “in a sort of Japan-work”; the grove of trees near her house spreads “about half the length of the *Mall*”. But the narrator also has some advanced ideas to share with the audience. As Behn openly avowed, her main purpose in all of her writing was entertainment, but throughout ***Oroonoko*** she does not hesitate to include social, political, and moral observations in the narrator's commentary when opportunities arise. The narrator never interrupts the progress of the story by preaching; the remarks are brief, pithy, and usually pointed. Almost every commentator has pointed out that the ideas on civilization, religion, and morality expressed in ***Oroonoko*** presage those of the French thinkers of the Enlightenment. Although Oroonoko is clearly not a noble savage, Behn uses him in the way philosophers would later use the figure. As Haydn White points out *[New York Review of Books*, 25 November, 1976], the myth was generally used not to gain better treatment for native people, but to attack “the concept of `nobility' in Europe.” Metzger, Guffey, and other critics have shown that claims for ***Oroonoko*** as an early anti-slavery novel are unjustified, and the narrator definitely does not finally indict the entire institution of slavery. She fails entirely to exploit the ironic potential in such situations as Oroonoko's inciting the men he himself enslaved to rebel against their masters. Nevertheless, the narrator exposes through Oroonoko the mistreatment of slaves, and his speeches are a powerful condemnation of the entire system. If he is not radical, she at least shows substantial humanitarian concern and sympathy. Always concerned with substance over form, her anger flashes against injustice and hypocrisy throughout the novel; her condemnation of certain practices in *“Christian* Countries, where they prefer the bare Name of Religion; and, without Vertue or Morality, think that sufficient” typical.

Like all good stories, Behn's entertaining tale is an exploration of human nature, and in ***Oroonoko*** she knows what happens when the real confronts the ideal, with the narrator serving as a standard of judgment. Ostensibly the narrator is judging Oroonoko and the unprincipled inhabitants of Coramentien and Surinam, proving his unparalleled nobility and their irredeemable wickedness. In ***Oroonoko*** the weak are those who lack power as well as principles. The slaves in Surinam are of this class and their reaction to Oroonoko takes two extreme forms. They either worship him—he is, after all, described in divine metaphors throughout the novel—or they actively participate in destroying him. On the other side are those unprincipled men who wield power. More threatened than the weak by the confrontation with the ideal, they rely on deceit. They either play on Oroonoko's noble nature to save themselves (Coramantien's old king) or abuse his honor and trust to destroy him (the slave trader and the colonial administrators). Whether weak or strong, those lacking principles cannot live with the ideal in their midst. Such judgments are too obvious to be particularly interesting, but in the process of making them, the narrator also makes one more judgment. Guffey points out that in her hero Behn emphasizes the type rather than the individual, and the same is true for the other characters. Between the base who totally lack humanity and the heroic who live and die only for honor is a third group, in which the majority of people always fall. One of the most interesting judgments Behn finally makes through the narrator is on the narrator herself and on the ordinary, decent, principled people like her. The judgment is made implicitly through the narrator's actions at the end of the novel rather than explicitly in direct commentary.

The narrator's absence from the events at the end of her story is disturbing, and at first glance it seems to indicate sloppy craftsmanship. Her removal is presented somewhat awkwardly, and the excuses she gives for her flights seem weak for one who has previously presented herself as one of Oroonoko's strongest partisans. Yet her flights are realistic and valid in psychological terms. Despite her protestations of support for Oroonoko, the narrator has long before the end of the novel revealed a divided spirit. Her position is portrayed as ambiguous. She truly admires Oroonoko, but as a representative of western civilization her commitment to him shows a certain shakiness. Scattered remarks made in the first person plural show that she identifies with the Europeans in Surinam, although never with the colonial administrators. She is Oroonoko's supporter, but even though he has shown his devotion to honoring his commitments, she does not finally trust him. When he promises her to wait with patience for a little longer for the Lord Governor and his freedom, she does not think it “convenient to trust him much out of our view.”

Her distrust of him emerges even more clearly during the rebellion. Oroonoko has previously vowed that he would never under any circumstances harm her and those around her: “As for my self, and those upon that Plantation where he was, he would sooner forfeit his eternal Liberty, and Life it self, than lift his Hand against his greatest Enemy on that place.” Yet when the women near of the revolt: “we were possess'd with extreme Fear, which no Persuasions could dissipate, that he would secure himself till night, and then, that he would come down and cut all our throats.” She explains that this apprehension “made all the Females of us fly down the River, to be secured,” and thus the narrator's first flight occurs. Her reactions perhaps suggest what social conditioning can do to the ordinary and decent individual; in a moment of fear, she falls back on stereotypical reactions, forgetting or distrusting all that she has learned of Oroonoko's honor and nobility. She finally is no more able than the wicked to live with the extraordinary and the ideal, because she cannot believe enough in the reality of Oroonoko's goodness to trust him fully.

This first flight to the river shows her divided spirit, her ultimate lack of commitment to the ideal under adverse circumstances. She returns, only to leave again when Oroonoko is dying, and her second flight reflects more than simply a last failure of belief in the extraordinary by the ordinary. Her excuse for leaving seems no more valid than the first one: “The Sight was ghastly: His Discourse was sad; and the earthy Smell about him so strong, that I was persuaded to leave the place for some time, (being myself but sickly, and very apt to fall into Fits of dangerous Illness upon any extraordinary Melancholy).” Similar incapacities have often enough been attributed to women under such conditions. As Johnson in his *Life of Pope* tries to account for Martha Blount's neglect of the sick poet in his last days, his first speculation is that Pope perhaps “considered her unwillingness to approach the chamber of sickness as female weakness. ...” But the narrator has not previously shown any traits which would suggest weakness. For example, she was among three out of eighteen who went up to the Indian town when “the Hearts of some of our Company fail'd, and they would not venture on Shore.” At the end of the novel, the reader gets the impression that the narrator can no longer cope with the situation and is so overwhelmed by what has happened that she can only disengage herself personally and allow events to sweep to their natural culmination in violence. It is difficult to avoid the feeling that the narrator could and should have done more. In fact, she herself directly contributes to that impression. After Oroonoko's whipping she says that had she not fled with the women, she could have prevented his mistreatment. In view of the final scene, this comment seems to be pure bravado, the last of the emphases on her personal importance inserted throughout the novel. At the end she says that even though her mother and sister were present during the terrible final mutilation and wanted to help Oroonoko, they were “not suffer'd to save him; so rude and wild were the Rabble, and so inhuman were the Justices who stood by to see the Execution. ...” Since the narrator's position in the colony is derived from the importance of the post that her father was to have held, it would seem logical that all of his relatives would command the same kind of respect. Undoubtedly the narrator would have found herself as powerless to halt the execution as her mother and sister were.

At the end of the novel, all of the good people are ineffectual. The narrator has fled. Trefy, whose function as a foil to the wicked men who persecute Oroonoko has been pointed out by Platt [***PMLA*** 49 (1934)] has been lured away on false pretenses by Byam. The narrator's mother and sister can only watch ineffectually. In certain kinds of volatile situations, there is a point where the momentum of events becomes so great that any individual agents are powerless to stop the flow; a strange sense of inevitability takes over. The passions released are so violent and irrational that they seem to possess an inherent pattern, an inevitability all their own, and the culmination can only be atrocity, as it is in ***Oroonoko***. It is at this point that normal standards cannot actively influence the course of events. These standards are useless because events have gone too far for normal, decent people to effectively assert their values. This sort of situation occurred on a giant scale in the French Revolution and recurs on a smaller scale in lynchings or other individual acts of mob violence. It happens whenever fanatics or evil men take control of a situation and are determined on destruction. Seen in this context, the narrator's flight emerges as realistic enough; at the end, whether or not her spirit was divided, she could not have done anything to stop the course of events.

Moreover, the narrator is no longer needed in the narrative to function as a standard of judgment for her readers. The final events are too terrible to require judgment by normal standards, just as they do not require heroic language for embellishment. Simply describing them accurately is condemnation enough, and editorial intrusions would be extraneous. The narrator's flight emphasizes that her standards cannot operate in the kind of world shown at the end of ***Oroonoko***. The standards of ordinary, decent people become useless and paralyzed when madness assumes control.

Thus Behn uses her narrator in ***Oroonoko*** to unify and to add realism to the disparate elements of her novel. In addition, the narrator's words and actions also provide a standard of judgment for the honorable, for the wicked, and, most interestingly, for the average people she herself represents. The view of their potential for effective action in explosive situations is a bleak but starkly honest one. The ordinary man will do all that he can; after all, the people at Parham House try to aid Oroonoko, and Trefy resists with a brave ultimatum to Byam and his men. But as events assume a terrifying momentum of their own from those who intend evil, the good can only fly from the inevitable, as the narrator does, or stay to endure the pain of watching ineffectually, as her mother and sister do. The novel itself, however, indicates one further option for the ordinary people trapped in this kind of situation. They can remember, as the narrator has done in ***Oroonoko***, and tell their stories again in regret, in remonstrance, and in warning. The standards of decent, average men fail in the world of ***Oroonoko***. Nevertheless, the writing of this kind of novel is, indirectly, a retrospective assertion of the validity and importance of those standards, held securely within the context of an entertaining story.

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