

Shaping and Misshaping Blacks in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*

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Four hundred years ago . . . , Sir Walter Raleigh landed near the mouth of the Orinoco River, in what is now Venezuela, searching for the fabled city of El Dorado. He predicted that the rugged lands he surveyed contained more "gold than either Cortes found in Mexico or Pizarro in Peru." He was right (or geology imitates art). The Venezuelan government estimates that \$90 billion in gold — perhaps 10 percent of the planet's reserves — lies in the Guiana Highlands of Brazil and Venezuela. Although Raleigh never found El Dorado, more than 60 North American, European, Japanese and South African mining companies have picked up where he left off.

— Leda Martins and Patrick Tierney, *The New York Times*

The above article excerpted from a recent issue of *The New York Times* captures the essentials of the never-ending process of the colonialization of the Third World. The dream of a materially enriched land of gold has inspired many imperialistic countries to venture out in unknown worlds, such as that surrounding the river, Orinoco. This is intriguing to us partly because the name of the river resembles the hero of Aphra Behn's early novel, *Oroonoko*. Later on, however, this simply eye-catching geographical name brings to mind the disturbing current state of suffering of the Third World. The article further goes on to describe a strip-mining existing operation since 1991 which, ironically, has been partly owned by the Venezuelan explorer and naturalist Charles Brewer, a highly respected research associate at the University of California and the New York Botanical Gardens. A Venezuelan congressional commission accused Mr. Brewer of having used scientific expeditions as a cover for the illegal mining of gold. Mr. Brewer's alleged expedition bears striking similarity to that of Sir Walter Raleigh four hundred years ago: The myth of gold has never been forgotten, and instead the search for it has been going on with more refined, and

thus far more skillful, expeditions in its subtle subterfuge ever since Sir Walter Raleigh's search for El Dorado.

On the political front of sixteenth-century England, James I was eager to unite England and Scotland, and the first seeds of an empire were sown. The Virginia Company of London recruited volunteers to colonize the new territories, which courtier and navigator Sir Walter Raleigh had named Virginia in honor of the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth. This interest in the New World is reflected in *The Tempest*, in which Shakespeare dramatizes the conflict between the would-be exponent of civilization, Prospero, and the refractory native Caliban. The name of Caliban, the savage slave in *The Tempest*, is a partial anagram of cannibal, an identification with the New World, whose imagined grim cultural practices form the various subjects of many 16th and 17th-century literary works.

The Elizabethan period was a great age of travel, indeed. Sir Walter Raleigh set foot in Virginia in 1595. He discovered not the anticipated gold but, instead, an unknown plant, tobacco. In 1608, Captain John Smith explored Chesapeake Bay, Virginia, and brought back with him an Indian princess, Pocahontas. While many of the Elizabethan writers moved away from the medieval vision of the world, they became enthralled instead with the astonishing accounts of travelers to the New World. And with the flowering of Protestantism, England came to perceive the world as being an infinitely varied whole, many-sided and difficult to interpret. Such ideas run through *Othello* (1604-5), in which Shakespeare daringly made a Moor the hero of the play. Africans were unknown to the city streets of England and made an appearance only at civic occasions such as the lord mayor's processions in London, in which the crowds were both fascinated and disturbed by their exotic looks. In the popular mind, Africans were linked with the devil's followers or semipagan figures, such as savages. *Othello*, the noble Moorish general, is the diabolic "other" who stirs fear and simultaneously attracts. He is both familiar and essentially strange. The very essences of fantasy and exoticism have continuously provoked the imagination of many Europeans to create the visual concept of "the other," that is, to shape the myth of the unknown.

This paper will examine the fictional process of shaping the mythic image of "the other" race, the blacks, which is continuously and inevitably misshaped —

i.e. misprisoned — by the narrator in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688). As the basis of examining the shaping and misshaping of the fictional subject, this paper takes its cue from Lennard Davis' argument in his *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*. He asserts the inevitably double-binded nature of the narration hinged upon both fact and fiction: "fiction-making and lying are central to the work. Fabrications build up into frames doubling back upon themselves until every turn reveals fact warped into fiction which turns back upon itself to become fact."¹⁾ A fact and its fiction-writing, in other words, continuously stimulate, reflect, and reproduce each other. And furthermore, they warp, distort, and fabricate each other. Consequently, the demarcation between fact and fiction begins to be blurred. This blurring demarcation in the process of both story-telling and fiction-writing inevitably occurs from narrative anxiety. To resolve the tension created by the deliberate shaping process of a fact in the course of story-telling, the narrator tries to assure the readers of the factual aspect of the story and becomes more and more insistent. As Robert Chibka points out in his article on *Oroonoko*, "[from] the novel's opening paragraphs, we see anxiety associated with characteristic literary activities: invention, adornment, management of words and events at the poet's pleasure. The narrator diverts this anxiety with a truth-claim, but proceeds to problematize truth, falsehood, and the grounds of belief throughout her narrative."²⁾ In other words, the narrative intervention in story-telling intends to trigger "literary activity," that is literary invention. Regardless of the factual reality of a history, its recorded history is meant to be an inventive fiction, i.e. a myth. To write a history or to invent a fiction means to shape and, at the same time, to misshape a history into a myth; a fact into a fiction; and a historic figure into a legendary hero.

Likewise, in Behn's *Oroonoko*, the image of African blacks is invented, created, and shaped in the story-telling which strongly reflects the narrator's ideal image of a European hero as well as that of the stereotypical savage. The narrator starts to resolve her inner tension between her intention of factual history-

1) Lennard J. Davis, p. 110.

2) Robert L. Chibka, p. 532.

writing and her inevitable falling into a fiction-making with her deliberate posing of unpretention:

I do not pretend, in give you the History of this Royal Slave, to entertain my Reader with Adventures of a feign'd Hero, whose Life and Fortunes Fancy may manage at the Poet's pleasure; not in relating the Truth, design to adorn it with any Accidents, but such as arriv'd in earnest to him: And it shall come simply into the World, recommended by its own proper Merits, and natural Intrigues; there being enough of Reality to support it, and to render it diverting, without the addition of Invention.

I was myself an Eye-Witness to a great part of what you will find here set down; and what I cou'd not be Witness of, I receiv'd from the Mouth of the chief Actor in this History, the Hero himself, who gave us the whole Transactions of his Youth: And though I shall omit, for brevity's sake, a thousand little Accidents of his life, which, however pleasant to us, where History was scarce, and Adventures very rare, yet might prove tedious and heavy to my Reader, in a World where he finds Diversions for every Minute, new and strange. But we who were perfectly charm'd with the Character of this great Man, were curious to gather every Circumstance of his Life. (8)

Ironically, this passage reveals clearly the narrative tension between fact and fiction; history-writing and myth-making. This truth-claim, however, increases the self-contradictory narrative dilemma. The more the narrator claims the story is based on a factual history, the more she finds herself in the position of creating, inventing, and shaping her story. Thus, she goes on to say it is the inevitable aspect of writing "in a World where [the reader] finds Diversions for every Minute, new and strange" that she shapes her story. While she claims to stick to the factual history, she admits to shaping and reshaping the story of her hero, Oroonoko, by editing and rearranging the history, without acknowledging her seemingly unintentional misshaping of it. Furthermore, she excuses her own intentional shaping and reshaping of the history for the sake of her reader's pleasure more than for her own need: "a thousand little Accidents of his life, which, however pleasant to us, where History was scarce, and Adventures very rare, yet might prove tedious and heavy to my Reader." These lines strongly suggest that the narrator has been willing to shape, reshape, and misshape the

factual history of the hero to render it fit for her domestic readers' tastes for fantasy and exoticism, in relating the "History" and the "Adventures" of her hero.

For instance, even those who accept the verisimilitude of the Surinam scenes are not likely to dismiss that Oroonoko's African character is largely "warped" and shaped so as to be "agreeable" to the readers as an ideal image of a protagonist in a European romance story. The following physical descriptions of Oroonoko closely resemble conventional heroic romance characters:

He was pretty tall, but of a Shape the most exact that can be fancy'd: The most famous Statuary cou'd not form the Figure of a Man more admirably tun'd from head to foot. . . . His Nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His mouth the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turn'd Lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. The whole Proportion and Air of his Face was so nobly and exactly form'd, that bating his Colour, there could be nothing in Nature more beautiful, agreeable and handsome. (13)

Oroonoko's physical description is closely related to a European standard of a good-looking statue of a Roman hero. That is, Oroonoko is presented as a black version of a standard European romance hero. Interestingly, the narrator emphasizes Oroonoko's outstanding difference from his own tribesmen, the African blacks, and his remarkable resemblance to a Roman hero. Whereas the narrator characterizes the typical African as possessing a flat nose and "those great turn'd Lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes," the royal prince, Oroonoko, does not carry any "natural" sign of being African except for his skin color.³⁾ The narrator singularly accentuates Oroonoko's unnaturally

3) In order to increase the truthful description of the African prince, the narrator largely ignores the fact of non-African country of Coramantien. Oroonoko is introduced as a prince from the kingdom of Coramantien. He is a Cormantine also known as Coromantee and Koromantin. According to Katherine M. Rogers, Coramantien was "not an African kingdom but a town on the Gold Coast, where the English had built their major trading station" (5-6). Furthermore, while the term Coramantien is anthropologically inaccurate, it was in standard use in the colonies. Although Wylie Sypher notes that Cormantines were supposed to be the finest of all blacks who were "good-looking, daring, stoical, loyal, but implacably resentful of injustice" (402-3), the narrator is again misshaping the geographical background of the Blacks.

European appearance to emphasize his noble character. In this way, she is deliberately shaping and misshaping her hero to entertain her domestic readers by emphasizing his unlikely European appearance.

Obviously, this is a clear example of the "warping" and misshaping of the African hero for the narrator's purpose of creating fantasy and exoticism as well as being sincere to convention. In order to be a royal character even in an African country, Coramantien, he or she has to bear a European look. Thus, the finest beauty of nature, Oroonoko, a black prince resembles a European beauty: "there could be nothing in Nature more beautiful, agreeable and handsome." By misshaping the black prince as a Europeanized hero, the narrator succeeds in cultivating the reciprocal affinity between her royal black hero and her European readers. Only then, Oroonoko becomes "agreeable" to her domestic readers' tastes.

After emphasizing the agreeableness of the black hero, the narrator then standardizes his beauty as one of Europeans: "There was no one Grace wanting, that bears the Standard of true Beauty" (13). Oroonoko's possession of the true beauty of nature suits the European standard of true beauty. "Standard" is quite a subjective term as much as "beautiful, agreeable, and handsome." The narrator again utilizes these words to shape her exotic hero to fit into her domestic readers' European tastes for a "Standard" image of a hero.

Once distinguishing Oroonoko's physical appearance from those of his own African tribesmen, the narrator further goes on to claim his superior character to any other living creature. In other words, she portrays her hero's great soul as equal to that of European whites: "Nor did the Perfections of his Mind come short of those of his Person; 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" (14). The idealized African hero, Oroonoko, is described as having an idealized European wit despite his skin color. And, the narrator further emphasizes that there has been a common belief about the general superiority of whites' intelligence, and asserts that her royal hero, the African Oroonoko possesses the European wit as much as the common white.

The narrator elaborates on the way her hero obtains European manners and languages as a part of his royal education as she continues to shape her hero as a

cultivated European hero. Ironically, the narrator presents the goal of the royal education of African blacks, particularly that of her hero, as matching the European standard of education. In other words, with all those elaborate praises of her hero's royal quality, the narrator is creating her own ideal image of a hero, which strongly reflects her own European cultural background. Therefore, she endeavors to convince her reader of the wonderfully amazing concept of the Europeanized African prince:

[It] was amazing to imagine where it was he learn'd so much Humanity; or, to give his Accomplishments a juster Name, where 'twas he got that real Greatness of Soul, those refined Notions of true Honour, that absolute Generosity, and that Softness that was capable of the highest Passions of Love and Gallantry. (12)

Once equipped with his Europeanized appearance and his European wit, Oroonoko's extraordinary character is described as a perfect man of "Humanity," "real Greatness of Soul," "true Honor," "absolute Generosity," and "Softness." As if there has been no such great hero in Oroonoko's native tribe, his character exactly models the narrator's ideal European hero. This reflects a problematic European imperialistic attitude because the perfect humane quality of the African black prince is characterized as a European one rather than as a universal quality of a great soul. In other words, it is a carefully designed process of characterizing the hero as a Europeanized one.

Oroonoko is presented with an exaggerated sentimentality and a precious language completely remote from his own African culture. The narrator further elaborates on the way her hero attains his royal education which is characteristically Europeanized. Oroonoko, as a result, "admire[s] the Romans."

[T]he most illustrious Courts could not have produced a braver Man, both for greatness of Courage and Mind, a Judgment more solid, a Wit more quick, and a Conversation more sweet and diverting. He knew almost as much as if he had read much: He had heard of and admired the Romans: He had heard of the late Civil Wars in England, and the deplorable Death of our great Monarch; and wow'd discourse of it with all the Sense and Abhorrence of the Injustice imaginable. He had an extreme good and graceful Mien, and all the Civility of a well-bred great Man. He had

nothing of Barbarity in his Nature, but in all Points address'd himself as if his Education had been in some European Court. (13)

By renouncing his African culture, Oroonoko is described to be successfully Europeanized. Having no barbarity, he appears to be a fine result of the education of the "European Court." Oroonoko's extraordinary familiarity with European manners and languages and his intellectual sophistication are presented ironically as the natural outcome of a successful African royal education. Here the narrator subtly emphasizes the African "barbarity" as opposed to Oroonoko's European nobility. Thus, Oroonoko is successfully described as a noble savage, since he is born an African savage and yet educated as a European noble.

Katherine Roger demonstrates a bona fide effort to convince Oroonoko readers to take all these Europeanized qualities of the hero as a perfectly factual history. She asserts that Oroonoko's familiarity with European culture is not improbable at that time.

[I]n view of the fact that coastal blacks had been dealing with Europeans for two centuries: the Portuguese arrived on the West African coast in the mid fifteenth century, the other Western European nations soon after. Moreover, in Oroonoko's time they dealt with the black ruling class on equal terms: traders would exchange hospitality, banter, and compliments with representatives of the local king; and then they would arrive at a mutually acceptable bargain. European visitors treated the rulers with respect, and kings' sons were educated in Europe.⁴⁾

This is a typical pro-Behn critic's stance about the historical probability reflected in *Oroonoko*: It is portrayed as it happened so it is a faithful description of history, not of fiction nor fabrication. Historian Thomas Astley also reports an extreme example of a Europeanized princely character. In 1669, an agent of the French West India Company described the Prince of Ardra as a big, handsome man with "an Air of Grandeur and Dignity, tempered with a Sweetness, that at once gained him Love and Respect." Entertaining the Frenchman at dinner, the

4) Roger, p. 6.

Prince proved a gracious host and kept "up the Conversation with Spirit." He was quite well "acquainted with the Situation and Affairs of Europe" and "asked several Questions . . . which discovered his Penetration, and the Delicacy of his Genius."⁵⁾ Both Roger and Astley eagerly prove that, already in the sixteenth century, many of the non-European countries' kings and nobles spoke good Portuguese and Spanish, and that by Oroonoko's time many blacks, in fact, were able to speak European languages.

These historical backings of the factual probability of the story are enough to divert the issue of manipulative shaping and misshaping of the African blacks by emphasizing the way it actually happened. With the narrator's assuring voice, Oroonoko is described as civilized and, at the same time, Europeanized rather than as simply utilizing European manners and cultures. For that matter, the narrator provides more background of how the Europeanized royal education was imparted to Oroonoko. Thus, she gives credit for much of part of the great quality of her hero's character to Oroonoko's French tutor, who is also described as a man of wit and learning himself.

Some part of it we may attribute to the Care of a French-Man of Wit and Learning; who finding it turn to very good Account to be a sort of Royal Tutor to this young Black, & perceiving him very ready, apt, and quick of Apprehension, took a great pleasure to teach him Morals, Language and Science; and was for it extremely belov'd and valu'd by him. Another Reason was, He lov'd, when he came from War, to see all the English Gentlemen that traded thither; and did not learn their Language, but that of the Spaniards also, with whom he traded afterwards for Slaves.
(12)

In other words, the narrator places Oroonoko in the line of the European education of "Morals, Language, and Science," carefully delivered by a European intellect, the French tutor. Different from the courtly education which Imoinda gets from Otan, i.e. Seraglio, Oroonoko receives an unconventionally foreign education. Moreover, the narrator largely dismisses what kind of conventional education Oroonoko might have received from his own African tribe. The

5) Thomas Astley, ed., p. ix.

description of Oroonoko's educational background heavily focuses on how closely he was civilized and cultivated in a European standard with the French tutor's help. Just as Roger and Astley try to demonstrate how a significant number of non-European people were Europeanized as early as the sixteenth century, the narrator emphasizes how successfully this African black prince Oroonoko is educated in a European way.

To conclude, although the narrator tries to entertain her domestic readers' tastes for fantasy and exoticism by writing a travel literature, she shapes her African hero, in the style of a European hero with whom her European readers can easily identify. In other words, she shapes and misshapes her hero from her own European colonial perspective to create an affinity between him and her readers.