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## The “Noble Savage”: Aristocracy, Slavery, Restoration Culture and Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, or *The Royal Slave*

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### Abstract

Evoking as historical and intertextual context the Restoration of English monarchy and the attendant political and cultural projects, chiefly royalist, legitimizing and advocating the stability of power in the period, the paper discusses Aphra Behn’s novel *Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave* by looking at its literary representation of the African prince as a “noble savage” – a trope that may be found also in John Dryden’s and Jonathan Swift’s work. The paper pays due attention to the politics of Behn’s novel in terms of its ambiguous treatment of race, slavery and colonialism, and evokes the concepts of “iterability” and “Third Space” in order to engage in a deconstructive reading of the novel’s royalist project of cultural investment in such notions as nobility, hierarchy and order.

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Writing on the idea of “Old” and “New” worlds, and discussing the notions of center and periphery, which are vital concepts in Postcolonial Studies, Gerald Gillespie discusses a general, somewhat self-contradictory cultural tendency that in many ways aptly characterizes (the European) Modernity:

In the Renaissance innumerable writers recommended turning to the idealized and gracious humanity of classical antiquity, and to an early Christianity free from later corruption. In the midst of the Enlightenment, the desire for renewal expressed itself not just in the aspiration for emancipation and progress under the aegis of reason, but also in the hope of regaining an understanding of the humble decency of peasants or folk or of the ‘noble savage.’ (347)

Gillespie’s remark may remind us that the so-called “long eighteenth century” may be discussed as an epoch of both the “cult of reason” and “the cult of feeling,” given the rise of sentimental, Gothic and Romantic literature and art in the period. More specifically, pointing to a certain nostalgia for lost innocence, for idealized “simplicity” of a sort, for which modern Europe seems to exhibit certain

longing, he refers to the idea of “noble savage,” which I will discuss here more extensively, treating it not so much as a concept organizing a coherent narrative, but rather as a certain literary (or, more broadly: discursive) trope – a trope of nostalgic primitivism, so to speak, that informs, sometimes unwittingly perhaps, much of the English writing of the Restoration and the early eighteenth century. My discussion of this pervasive, paradoxical trope of the “noble savage” will connect also with the idea of restoring, of restitution or recuperation, which Robert Phiddian traces in the historical Restoration (of the English monarchy), which he reads not merely as a political event, but rather as a much broader, cultural and “ideological” project. This will provide a context for a reading of Aphra Behn’s work, alongside some other Restoration texts (by John Dryden and Jonathan Swift) that evoke this discursive trope.

In Robert Phiddian’s argument, the restoration of monarchy and the coronation of Charles II in 1660 marked the beginning of the more extensive royalist project of restituting peace, traditional order and hierarchy marked by “traditional” (royalist) Englishness (I will refer to Aphra Behn’s royalist allegiances later in my paper). While endorsing, admittedly, also the values of learning, science, art, theatre and a morality largely opposed to the current stereotype of the “puritan” ethic, Restoration culture was averse to all facets of revolution, dogmatism, radicalism and innovation, professing “a return to origins” and a restitution of stable authority provided by monarchy and the Anglican Church, in an effort to ensure a “pragmatic construction of public sphere of controlled and limited contestation” (Phiddian 24–27). In the more pronouncedly royalist manifestations of this “Restoration” project, aristocracy and authority were put in lieu of commerce and colonialism – traditional *nobility* was valued over social *mobility*. Importantly, clergymen and Tory defenders of the Anglican Church often appealed to both the images of “primitive Christianity” and to the importance of “proper obedience to civil and ecclesiastical authority” (Phiddian 27). “Restoration enterprises constructed themselves discursively as swerves away from the errors of the immediate past,” i.e. away from the revolutionary impulse that resulted in Civil Wars, Phiddian asserts, pointing to the period’s “myopic veneration of established order and right” (27).<sup>1</sup>

It seems that within the ideology of such “restorative” efforts, the figure of “noble savage” functioned as a trope marking a tensed conjunction of the period’s different characteristic discursive frameworks, especially those of progress, colonialism, peace, enlightenment, religious tolerance and social cohesion; a trope often utilized in articulation of the ideologically motivated wish for a return to an older and hence presumably more “natural” or “harmonious” order of things, so to speak. In Section II of “A Discourse Concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit” (published in 1704 as a part of *A Tale of a Tub*), Jonathan Swift, an Anglican clergyman, engages in diatribes on religious controversies and orthodoxies (a common target for Restoration satire and burlesque). The opening passage of the section, which discusses the religion of the “wild Indians,” seems

to display the logical tension between two strategies of addressing the issue of the coexistence of different religions; tolerance and pluralism on the one hand, exclusion and stigmatization on the other:

You will read it very gravely remarked in the books of those illustrious and right eloquent penmen, the modern travellers, that the fundamental difference in point of religion between the wild Indians and us, lies in this - that we worship God, and they worship the devil. But there are certain critics who will by no means admit this distinction, rather believing that all nations whatsoever adore the true God, because they seem to intend their devotions to some invisible power of greatest goodness and ability to help them. (177)

The two interpretations are clearly at odds; in the light of the first, the second is blasphemous, while in the light of the second, the first appears indecent. God and devil are, due to the cultural difference between the English and the Indians, at the danger of becoming confused. While the first interpretation may justify the material and cultural colonization of the Other (who is accused of worshipping the devil), the second seems to benevolently achieve such colonization by effacing all potentially disruptive differences (both the English and the Indians adore the same God). Swift juxtaposes the pious Indians with “the deportment and the cant of our English enthusiastic preachers” who are “vending spiritual gifts” and thus reduce religion to “nothing but a trade, acquired by as much instruction, and mastered by equal practice and application, as others are” (178). Writing in the late seventeenth century, Swift is mocking in the “Mechanical Operation” the zealous Puritans who reduce religion to a “trade” and finds it appropriate to juxtapose them with what Laura Brown identifies as the figure of the “noble savage” (later employed by Rousseau, it can be found also in the “poor Indian” as described by Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man*) (Brown 223). Symbolizing the more harmonious and natural existence, the “noble savage” (“wild Indians” in Swift) was a figure of narration to some extent alternative to the mainstream colonialist line, an alternative that valued tolerance and celebrated the exotic otherness of the colonized cultures (it also predated the later abolitionist/anti-slavery discourses). This view prompted the seventeenth-century “long and complex debate about natural and revealed religion” within which some argued that the non-Christian native “others” should not be considered as excluded from salvation simply due to their “lack of access to the teachings of Christ” (Brown 223). In case of Swift, the “noble savage” figure supports his mockery of the endless religious quarrels and controversies of the pre-Restoration seventeenth-century England: the modesty and simplicity of Indians contrasts with the sectarianism of the decadent European Christianity.

John Dryden's long discursive poem “Religio Laici” (printed in 1682, sometimes translated as “Layman's Faith”), in many respects a crucial voice in the Restoration debates concerning the state, religion and tolerance, partakes in

the then current debate on natural versus revealed religion and includes a largely analogical figure:

And what Provision could from thence accrue  
 To *Indian* Souls, and Worlds discovered *New*?  
 [...]
 *They, who the written rule had never known,*  
*Were to themselves both Rule and Law alone:*  
*To Natures plain indictment they shall plead;*  
*And, by their Conscience, be condemn'd or freed.*  
 Most Righteous Doom! Because a Rule reveal'd  
 Is *none* to *Those*, from whom it was conceal'd.  
 Then those who follow'd *Reasons* Dictates right;  
 Liv'd up, and lifted high their *Natural Light*;  
 With Socrates may see their Maker's Face,  
 While Thousand *Rubrick-Martyrs* want a place. (ll. 178–211; original emphasis)

The typical elements of the trope of “noble savage” are present in Dryden’s defence of the inhabitants of “Worlds discovered *New*”: the belief in the guidance of a noble, natural instinct, in the uneducated and hence also uncorrupted reason of dignified, simple men led by their “humane Sense” and by the “secret paths of *Providence*” (ll. 186–187). Though *Religio Laici* is a poem mainly in defence of the Anglican Church, it uses the examples of ancient and exotic cultures to argue the importance of order, tradition and commonsense, castigating the revolutionary zeal of religious enthusiasts and extremists (the “*Rubrick-Martyrs*”), who question both the social hierarchy and the validity of classical learning (they “grind at it with a pious smile; and call’d it a judgment of God against the Hierarchy,” as Dryden writes in the Preface to the poem). In short, the trope of “noble savage” (the vindication of the “*Indian* souls”) serves here the royalists purposes of supporting the established order through a rhetoric of traditionalism, the rule of law, the faith in providence and reason of the “*Natural Light*” uncorrupted by endless theological quarrels. Simplicity, restraint, obedience and good-heartedness become requisite for salvation, more so than erudite knowledge of theology:

That private Reason ‘tis more just to curb  
 Than by Disputes the public Peace disturb.  
 For points obscure are of small use to learn  
 But *Common quiet* is *Mankind’s concern*. (ll. 447–450; original emphasis)

Dryden clearly prefers social order – the “public Peace” and “Common quiet” – to the adventurous pursuit of truth by “private Reason” – the respect for social hierarchy and the authority of the Established Church is for Dryden an antidote against the modern malaise of democratization of reason and the ensuing dangerous secularization of theology.

Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko, or The Royal Slave. A True History* (1688) is a key Restoration text in many respects: it is often regarded one of the first novels in English (though the debates about the "origins" of the (English) novel are complex and continuing), it provides an early account of colonization and slave trade (a fictional one, albeit largely based on Behn's knowledge and experience she gained during her trip to Surinam), and it is sometimes regarded as a proto-abolitionist text that provides "the first fictional representation of a slave rebellion in British literature" (Sussman 238).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the politics of this text in terms of race, slavery, class, royalist ideology and gender are complex and often ambiguous, while the main character – the royal slave Oroonoko, later renamed by the plantation managers as Caesar – is equally ambivalent in being constructed as a paradoxical "noble savage." Already at the level of description of Oroonoko's appearance, the narrator's intention to represent him as an exotic aristocrat is visible in the somewhat "Europeanized" construction of his body. As Edna L. Steeves observes:

Though in some respects Oroonoko was a kind of Negro *précieux*, he and his beloved Imoinda represent what the sentimentalists and the primitivists conceived as the perfect model of the noble aborigine. Oroonoko, in Mrs. Behn's words, was tall, admirably turned from head to foot, a face of polished ebony, eyes piercing and the whites like snow, white his teeth, his nose Roman instead of African and flat, his mouth finely shaped – not with huge lips – his hair to his shoulders and neatly combed. (93)

What adds to the aristocratic air of Oroonoko, who is an African prince of Coramantien and heir to the throne, is the fact that from his tender years he was tutored by "a Frenchman of wit and learning" who took "a great pleasure in teaching him morals, language and science" as he discerned in the prince some noble faculties, "perceiving him very ready, apt and quick of apprehension" (Behn 17). What is more, in the course of his education, Oroonoko "had heard of and admired the Romans" and "he had heard of the late Civil Wars in England and the deplorable death of our great monarch, and would discourse of it with all the sense of abhorrence of the injustice imaginable" (Behn 17).<sup>3</sup> Subsequently throughout the novel the narrator's preoccupation with order, hierarchy, honour and loyalty is of central importance and intermingles with Behn's depiction (and her stance on) the issues of race, colonialism and slavery.

Oroonoko is enamored with Imoinda, the daughter of the late general, and they exchange vows, but her exceptional beauty charms also the old king, who invites her to his harem, and since "the obedience the people pay their king was not at all inferior to what they paid their gods" (Behn 24), Imoinda has to concede. This early part of the plot is romance-like, as the venerated but senile and somewhat heartless monarch encumbers the affair of the beautiful young Prince and his equally beautiful concubine.<sup>4</sup> Behn constructs the plot skillfully, however, in order

to emphasize both Oroonoko's loyalty to the king (to be Imoinda's husband even after the old king's (his grandfather's) death would "ignobly set an ill precedent," he declares), and, by capitalizing on the fact that the lovers exchanged their vows before Imoinda was given the royal veil and invited to *otan* (king's harem), to put the actions of the king under critical scrutiny. The old, corrupted monarch is thus vaguely criticized (he robbed his son of a wife, though he later felt "troubled" by the fact), but the young noble prince, and a heir to the throne, is by the same token excused for his attempt to scheme a secret meeting with his beloved during the celebrations thrown at the king's palace. The meeting of two lovers is dramatized by Behn by the use of a somewhat startling account:

But as soon as he entered, one day, into the apartment of Imoinda with the king, at the first glance from her eyes, notwithstanding all his determined resolution, he was ready to sink in the place where he stood; and had certainly done so, but for support of Aboan, a young man who was next to him; which, with his change of countenance, had betrayed him, had the king chanced to look that way. And I have observed, it is a very great error in those who laugh when one says, *a Negro can change colour*; for I have seen them as frequently blush and look pale, and that as visibly as ever I saw in the most beautiful white. (Behn 29–30)

The changing of colour may be read in several ways and in conjunction with several contexts, both internal and external to the plot. Most importantly, however, it does alert the reader's attention to how *both* blackness and whiteness are purposefully examined and questioned to a certain extent in Behn's novella. Blushing, which connects to the feeling of embarrassment and hence to the sense of decency, also bears connotation with the idiom of chivalry in courtly romances and perhaps echoes as well the Christian ideals of modesty, chastity and purity. By universalizing blushing as a bodily response present regardless of race or culture Behn validates the "nobility" of her (royal) hero and heroine, while putting into question the supremacy of whiteness, especially in the context of Oroonoko's later frequent critical remarks on the conduct and manners of the European Christians (which I shall discuss later). Still, however, in Moira Ferguson's view, such "Anglo-African" discourse that "constructs West African reality Eurocentrically" tends to intensify "negative attitudes towards Africans in general and slaves in particular" (340). Nevertheless, the ambiguity of the passage I quote above stems from the fact that even though the description refers to the two "royal" Africans – Oroonoko and Imoinda – the comment makes a reference to "Negroes" in general. Even if the comment is undoubtedly Eurocentric, it may be read as an at least ambivalent gesture that both generously extends the scope of humanness (or "humane Sense," to use Dryden's expression evoked earlier) to the dark-skinned Africans and simultaneously reinforces the "white" Eurocentric provenance of that humanness by strengthening the symbolism of blushing, whiteness and paleness.<sup>5</sup>

Upon discovering Oroonoko and Imoinda embracing each other in one of the palace's chambers, the enraged king harshly punishes her by selling her to slavery (for Imoinda this is a "cruel sentence, worse than death"), whereas Oroonoko, who manages to escape and join his loyal army, is some time later tricked into captivity by a degenerate slave-trader, referred to simply as a "commander" or "captain" (his name, perhaps tellingly, is not given). It is this captain who embodies the worst and most ignoble qualities of colonizers and rapacious slave-traders. He was "well known to Oroonoko, with whom he had trafficked for slaves, and he had used to do the same with his predecessors" (Behn 50). The said captain uses his long friendship with Oroonoko, and his "finer sort of address and conversation" than is typical for people of his profession, to lure the prince to his ship together with his entire court and all his comrades; pretending to host a fine dinner in their honour, he treacherously locks the entire company in iron cages, with a view to selling them into slavery.

What is at stake in the event is the difference between "traditional" African slavery as endorsed by Oroonoko (who, in fact, himself kept slaves, and had previously "sold abundance of his slaves" to the captain he befriended) and the captain's use of treachery to capture prince Oroonoko and his entourage – the members of the royal/"aristocratic" caste – a deed brutally violating the morals and the hierarchy of their native culture. It is at this point that Oroonoko questions the principles and morals of the Europeans: "the captain had protested to him upon the word of a Christian, and sworn in the name of a great god," but the same captain also explains that breaking an oath for a Christian means "eternal torment *in the world to come*" (Behn 54–55; emphasis mine). Oroonoko castigates the invalidity of such an oath, juxtaposing it with the value of true honour, to violate which would mean "offending and diseasing all mankind; harming, betraying, circumventing and outraging all men." From inside the iron cage, Oroonoko sees through the captain's rhetoric and says that the punishment devised by the Christian god "is done so secretly and deferred so long" that they (the Christians) may easily do away with any sense of honour or loyalty towards "all mankind" (Behn 55).

Oroonoko's criticism of Christian morality is more in defence of honour and loyalty (the "noble" virtues of aristocracy) and less against slavery as such, a practice in which Oroonoko himself has long been actively involved. Furthermore, by accentuating slavery as a part of culture of the African tribes Behn undercuts Oroonoko's later passionate exhortation against slavery. Indeed, Oroonoko's outrage and his later conduct in the colony of Surinam "confirm the implied dichotomy between the essential nature of those who are slaves and those who are free human beings" (Andrade 194). After being miraculously reunited with Imoinda, who also was transported to the plantation in Surinam, the couple enjoys privileges denied to other slaves, in recognition of their status. Oroonoko is treated more nobly but only because he vouches with his honour and promises



not to interfere with the managers of the plantation, a promise he stands by up to the point when he and Imoinda (now pregnant with his child) grow weary of the life in captivity and wish to return to their native land. Oroonoko befriends the manager of the plantation, Mr. Trefry, an agreeable gentleman who “was a very good mathematician, and a linguist, could speak French and Spanish” (Behn 59). Trefry’s noble, aristocratic manners gain Oroonoko’s respect, who becomes a friend to both him and the female narrator of the story, enjoying incomparably better treatment than the rest of the slaves. Such elements of the plot seem to suggest that, as Ferguson observes in the context of Behn’s novel, “slave trade can blend harmoniously with the aristocratic ethic” but only if colonization and slave-trade are managed by the educated, well-mannered and humane aristocrats and not by the “ostensibly arrogant and avaricious entrepreneurs who did not represent social and moral values cherished by aristocrats” (344–345).

Thus, Oroonoko is not only a royal slave, he is a *royalist* slave as well, a figure supporting the Restoration rhetoric of hierarchy and order, while his criticism of Christianity and the voracious greed of slave-traders reads along the lines of Swift’s mockery of both travellers and religious enthusiasts. In both cases the “noble savage” as a trope and a rhetorical figure discredits European culture and reveals its degeneracy, yet solely through the advocacy for the return to the “authenticity” of classical/Christian “humanism.” Oroonoko’s blackness and his African origin matter less than his aristocratic status of a prince and a rightful heir to the throne, and his ethnicity, arguably, is largely compromised by his “Europeanized” manners and his impressive education. The historical and cultural context that I attempt to outline here needs to be kept in mind also when reading Oroonoko’s speech against slavery because, as I have attempted to show, the subject of enunciation is problematic here – it is important *who* is speaking (who is, in fact, “doing” the speech). While the speech is written by Behn, it is delivered by *Caesar*, the name full of telling (and even ironic) connotations (aristocratic, classical, imperial), given to the captured Oroonoko upon his arrival to Surinam: “I ought to tell you that the Christians never buy any slaves but the give them some name of their own, their native ones being likely very barbarous and hard to pronounce; so that Mr Trefry gave Oroonoko that of Caesar, which name will live in that country as long as that (scarcely more) glorious one of the great Roman” (Behn 61).<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the speech itself may be (and inevitably is) also subject to certain *iterability*, in the deconstructive sense of the word, i.e. it travels through time and space, and works *iterum*, as a material textual construction, somewhat outside the hermeneutic “function” prescribed for it within the novel either by the speaker, or by the novel’s author, or by its “original” historical and cultural context.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the speech in and of itself may be (and has been) read in a number of ways, also as a proto-abolitionist text:

*And why, said he, my dear friends and fellow-sufferers, should we be slaves to an unknown people? Have they vanquished us nobly in fight? Have they won us in honourable battle? And are we by the chance of war become their slaves? This would not anger a noble heart, this would not animate a soldier's soul. No, but we are bought and sold like apes or monkeys, to be the sport of woman, fools and cowards, and the support of rogues, runagades that have abandoned their own countries for raping, murders, theft, and villainies. Do you not hear every day how they upbraid each other with infamy of life, below the wildest savages? And shall we render obedience to such a degenerate race, who have no one human virtue left to distinguish them from the vilest creatures? Will you, I say, suffer the lash from such hands? They all replied with one accord, No, no, no; Caesar has spoke like a great captain, like a great king. (Behn 89–90; original emphasis)*

The poetics and politics of this speech (the “harangue” on “the miseries and ignominies of slavery,” as the narrator calls it) are worth examining. Caesar resents being a slave to “an unknown people” as he questions and castigates one kind of slavery that he opposes to another one – a more “acceptable” slavery resulting from military conquest or “the chance of war.” The “unknown people” are those without name, without title or status, not appointed by a hierarchy of any culture – the word “runegade” (Behn’s spelling) comes probably from Spanish *renegado* meaning “an apostate” (*renegatus* in Medieval Latin), hence someone who resigns from the membership in a symbolic community governed by custom and law.<sup>8</sup> In the marked contrast with the nameless villains and brutal vagabonds (cf. the nameless deceitful “captain” who first captured the prince) – Oroonoko/Caesar has as many as two dignifying names, which may suggest certain hybridism of two cultures, and perhaps also the hybridity of the “Third Space,” which, in Homi K. Bhabha’s view, characterizes, in fact, any culture, or even culture “as such”:

It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity, that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew [...] we should remember that it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. (Bhabha 55–56)

It is the “inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” that deconstructs the myth of fixity, purity and cohesion of culture, revealing it as an entangled web of re-inscriptions, disparities, appropriations and negotiations; it may hence allow for “envisaging the national anti-nationalist histories of the ‘people’” (56). Though he is given the name *Caesar* in recognition of his nobility, the new name also signals the recognition of the barbarity of prince’s native name – it is his new name that dignifies Oroonoko while, at the same time, robbing him of his identity. The new name, given as a sign of trust in his polite submissiveness as a slave, becomes, however, surprisingly appropriated and “rearticulated” by the

prince as he instigates the rebellion of the slaves. The “hybridity” of European culture – its inherent accumulated contradictions of paganism and Christianity, militancy and charity, imperialism and sectarianism, are evoked and exposed by Oroonoko, now baptized as Caesar, a former warrior and slave owner, who is “awakened” by the shock ensuing from his contact not with Western culture in its “noble” aspects (he was long familiar with Western learning and languages), but with the brutality and greed of the slave trade and plantation industry – and he becomes an ardent advocate of the enslaved people. Caesar, if only momentarily, becomes an anti-Caesar in his ferocious condemnation of slavery.

For the most part, however, the “split-space of enunciation” (Bhabha 56) is covered, Behn’s royalist project remains intact – and Oroonoko simply is Caesar – symbolizing privilege as an embodiment of nobility, antiquity and seamless hierarchy, who defends slavery in his speech as a “natural” consequence of conquest and war. At the end, the failure of the rebellion, the tragic death of Imoinda in a ritual of “mercy-killing” conducted by Oroonoko, and the ignoble death of Oroonoko himself, recaptured, tortured and mutilated, bring the reader to the terrifying “outside” of culture, a place of no difference or negotiation, definitely not a “Third Space,” but a place crowded with renegades – people without names (“the rabble” which the narrator describes as “wild”):

He had leaned to take tobacco, and when he was assured he should die, he desired they would give him a pipe in his mouth, ready lighted which they did, and the executioner came and first cut off his members and threw them into the fire. After that, with an ill-favoured knife, they cut his ears and his nose, and burned them; he still smoked on, as if nothing has touched him. Then they hacked off one of his arms, and still he bore up, and held his pipe. But at the cutting off the other arm, his head sunk, and his pipe dropped, and he gave up the ghost without a groan or a reproach. My mother and sister were by him all the while but not suffered to save him, so rude and wild were the rabble, and so inhuman were the justices who stood by to see the execution. (Behn 111–112)

The ghastly cruelty and anarchy of the scene is juxtaposed with Oroonoko’s/ Caesar’s heroic dignity, but the larger juxtaposition here is that between order and savagery, or between culture and anarchy, to evoke Mathew Arnold’s phrase. The nostalgic politics of the novel seems to need the flesh of the uncorrupted (or, if at all, nobly corrupted) “savage” prince for its attempts at recuperation and restoration of the faith in the cultural role of nobility, aristocratic blood and breeding. For Ferguson, Behn’s novel “exalts Oroonoko’s heroism and rebellion as long as they do not threaten British colonialism and royal authority” (348), and in such a reading the execution of Oroonoko is, one may say, a result of a sordid mistake – for the executed man is a well-bread, loyal, English-speaking aristocrat, unjustifiably enslaved, not a “Negro” who could stand for the lower class of humans, i.e. “savages.” The lower class is represented here by the cruel

plantation managers and corrupt justices – those “renegades” who, apparently, have completely misunderstood the legacy of the long, “noble” tradition of conquest and slavery that the name *Caesar* inevitably connotes.

## Notes

- 1 Admittedly, the chain of major events in English history following the coronation of Charles II in 1660 has repeatedly put into question the validation of that stable order: “the accession of a Catholic monarch, the ‘Glorious’ Revolution, the accession of a Dutch monarch, the Jacobite alternative, the Hanoverian succession; all these events fractured the impression of seamlessness on which immemorial authority relied” (Phiddian 26).
- 2 It is still a matter of contention whether Behn did actually travel to Surinam. She was a monarchist, a supporter of Charles II, most probably also a spy for the court. The plot of *Oroonoko* suggests both her knowledge of the ways in which the Royal African Company (which monopolized the slave trade at the time) operated, but also, in many passages, a degree of ignorance on such matters as transportation of slaves and their lives in colonies (though this may also be attributed in part to the romance-like qualities of her tale). See Ferguson (1992) and Andrade (1994) for more details on this matter.
- 3 Later in the novel, the narrator adds that Oroonoko’s tutor “was banished out of his own country [i.e. France – P.U.] for some heretical notions he held,” noting that “though he was a man of very little religion, he had admirable morals and a brave soul” (Behn 49). In a manner typical of Restoration and royalist rhetoric, the comment castigates dogmatic and sectarian religiosity (with an implicit reference also to French Catholicism), in a manner similar to Dryden, by placing emphasis on morals and bravery, values which may well be exercised also by a person of “very little religion.”
- 4 Imoinda’s beauty is underlined by the narrator, who dubs her “the beautiful black Venus to our young Mars,” yet, as Felicity A. Nussbaum observes in her study *The Limits of the Human. Fictions of Anomaly, Race and Gender in the Long Eighteenth Century*, “[it] was not always clear how fundamental dark coloring might be” (151). Nussbaum refers, for instance, to the fact that in Thomas Southerne’s tragedy *Oroonoko* (1695), a play based on the novel and popular throughout the eighteenth century, “Imoinda is white, the daughter of a white European” (151).
- 5 On blushing and paleness in connection to the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility and its gendered notions of “nervous system” consult, for instance, G. J. Barker-Benfield’s study *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago 1996).

- 6 As Ania Loomba reminds us, “racial stereotyping is not the product of modern colonialism alone, but goes back to the Greek and Roman periods which provide some abiding templates for subsequent European images of ‘barbarians’ and outsiders” (92). This adds further poignancy and irony to Oroonoko’s new name.
- 7 For the discussion of the idea of “context” and the notion of “iterability” see, for instance, Jonathan Culler’s *On Deconstruction* (110–134).
- 8 “Renegade” in *Online Etymology Dictionary*: <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=renegade>

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