

Cynthia Richards and Mary Ann O'Donnell eds. 2014
Approaches to Teaching Behn's Oroonoko
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Like the other volumes in the MLA series *Approaches to Teaching World Literature*, *Approaches to Teaching Behn's Oroonoko* also develops from a questionnaire which was completed by a great number of accomplished scholars and experienced teachers who have been using Behn's novel in an incredibly wide variety of courses. Therefore, taking this starting point into account, this volume was clearly conceived to meet the requirements of those instructors in charge of designing and/or teaching a course on, or at least including, the above-mentioned novel. Richards and O'Donnell's volume is split up into Part One, which gathers the information relating to the full range of materials available for both instructors and students; and Part Two, which comprises five different sections: Formal and Thematic Contexts, Cultural Contexts, Pedagogical Contexts, Comparative Contexts, and Authorial Contexts. These two main parts of the volume are preceded by a preface where the authors state the reason why *Oroonoko* was chosen for this series, and are followed by four brief sections: Notes on Contributors, Survey Participants, Works Cited, and an Index of the names which appear throughout the whole volume.

In spite of its briefness, Part One, Materials, includes the basic resources, editions, classroom texts, online editions, concordances, bibliographies, biographies, monographs, collected essays, book chapters and articles, discussions on race and slavery, historical approaches, comparative approaches, maps and illustrations, online resources, and a comprehensive chronology, i.e., everything a teacher may need in order to design and/or teach any course on

Oroonoko. On the contrary, Part Two, entitled Approaches, is far more extensive and, in fact, constitutes the main core of the volume: each of its five sections comprises between four and six chapters on different aspects of Behn's novel. These five sections are preceded by an introductory chapter which summarizes the vast number of questions *Oroonoko* gives rise to in the classroom, questions which will be answered in the different sections which make up Part Two.

The first section, Formal and Thematic Contexts, contains five chapters about the formal and thematic properties which make *Oroonoko* different from other literary works: in the original "What kind of Story is This?," Aravamudan deals with the complexity of genres by analysing the four kinds of "kind" in Behn's novel; Botelho's revealing "Credibility and Truth in *Oroonoko*" is about the slipperiness of truth; in "*Oroonoko*: Romance to Novel," Zimbaro focuses on the two different modes of discourse in the novel: the high heroic style, which delineates the spiritual essence of the hero, and the low realistic mode, which creates the effect of an unadorned account of "reality;" in "The Language of *Oroonoko*," which shows the linguistic complexity of the novel, Overton analyses the way speech is represented, the implications of some words, and the use of different forms of reference for several of the characters; and Maurer's "*Oroonoko* and the Heroics of Virtue" illustrates why this is an excellent text to use to teach students about the changing nature of heroic virtue and about the ways in which a masculine gender identity was itself constructed in relation to heroic ideals.

The second section of this part of the volume comprises six chapters which deal with the influence of the students' cultural context on their interpretation of the text. In "*Oroonoko* and Blackness," Hughes deals with the importance of encouraging students to read about race and culture in the seventeenth century before analysing *Oroonoko*. In "Economic *Oroonoko*," taking her students' concern about money into account, Gevirtz discusses *Oroonoko*'s exploration of the effect of colonialist capitalism on morality. In order to achieve her goals, Gevirtz uses PBS's *Colonial House*, which allows her to exploit students' familiarity with visual media and attraction towards reality television to make the life of the seventeenth century real to twenty-first-century undergraduates. Stevens's "The Traffic of Women: *Oroonoko* in an Atlantic Framework" focuses on the transoceanic movement and the

interrelation of people, objects, and people as objects. As a centerpiece for a course entitled "Women and Writing in the British Atlantic World," *Oroonoko* is bracketed by different texts, because Behn's novel is a product of the emergence and transformation of many literary genres, which took place as a consequence of global exploration, conquest, and trade. Moreover, Stevens tells about her students' reactions toward the texts they have to compare with *Oroonoko*. She makes it clear that reading some texts before Behn's novel is very helpful to understand *Oroonoko*, but the latter also contributes to the understanding of subsequent texts. In "Entering Atlantic History: *Oroonoko*, Revolution, and Race," Doyle deals with the understanding of *Oroonoko* as an Atlantic-world text. According to this contributor, Behn's novel re-creates the century-old, revolutionary Anglo-Atlantic question about proper authority and proper rebellion. However, Behn hints that the reorganization of culture around righteous liberty and levelling values leads to chaos, violence, and the end of properly noble races. In "Writing War in *Oroonoko*," Alker and Nelson list all the overt and covert references to military titles (general, captain, lieutenant general), making reference to other classical and contemporary literary works. Krise's "Oroonoko as a Caribbean Text" tries to justify the fact that, although *Oroonoko* does not meet the criteria of what constitutes a legitimate Caribbean text, it provides one of the earliest literary representations of the people, cultures, and issues of the Caribbean.

The third section, Pedagogical Contexts, comprises the chapters which deal with the aspects of *Oroonoko* the contributors focus on most when teaching the novel. In "How Big Did She Say That Snake Was? Teaching the Contradiction in *Oroonoko*," Turner focuses on the contradictions which can be found, above all, in the descriptive parts of the novel and, at the same time, he encourages instructors to draw attention to these parts. In "Teaching *Oroonoko* in a Literature Survey 1 Course," de Freitas Boe explains how she makes her students realise that ideas can be historically specific by focusing on *Oroonoko*'s beauty. In "Teaching *Oroonoko* in a Literature Survey 2 Course," Cross explains how she tries to make students map the complex dynamism of genre, gender, and race as it shifts with the growth of British imperialism. Rubik's "Teaching *Oroonoko* in the Travel Narrative Course" highlights the importance of teaching it in the context of other colonial travelogues because this makes the students aware of Behn's indebtedness to some of the generic

features of travel literature and also to her originality, especially in her open-minded attitude toward cross-cultural encounters. In "Teaching Oroonoko at a Historically Black University," Richardson explains how she leads her students to realise that the assumptions and ideas which are taken for granted were under construction during the time when Behn was writing her novel. In "Teaching the Teachers: *Oroonoko* as a Lesson in Critical Self-Consciousness," Bond deals with the different frames which can be taken into account in order to teach this novel.

The fourth section, Comparative Contexts, embraces the chapters which deal with the texts which *Oroonoko* can be compared with. Rosenthal's "*Oroonoko's* Cosmopolitans" focuses on the costs and benefits of becoming a citizen of the world. Reading *Oroonoko* after having read works including characters who venture out of their familiar worlds, such as *The Blazing World*, *The New Atalantis*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Country Wife*, allows the reader to analyse the differences and similarities among works whose main aim is to describe the different ways in which societies can be organized. In "Teaching *Oroonoko* with Milton and Dryden; or, Behn's Use of the Heroic," Runge claims that, in order to understand *Oroonoko*, it is important to go back to the years of its production and to analyse the different conceptions of the heroic. She also points out that *Oroonoko* is more complex than Dryden's or Milton's heroes: Behn borrows from heroic genres but, in the end, she leaves the heroic code fractured. In "Teaching *Oroonoko* with Early Modern Drama," MacDonald remarks that, by comparing it with *Abdelazer*, *Othello*, and Southerne's *Oroonoko*, students discover Behn's work for themselves. Juengel's "Unbearable Theater: *Oroonoko's* Sentimental Afterlife" reflects on teaching *Oroonoko* through its relation to the sentimental theatre which follows from it, i.e., plays by Thomas Southerne, John Hawkesworth, Francis Gentleman, or John Ferrier, among others. In "Two *Oroonokos*: Behn's and Bandele's," Munns compares these two texts in order to analyse their similarities because Bandele's is supposed to be an adaptation of Southerne's *Oroonoko*. In "Representations of Race, Status, and Slavery in Behn's *Oroonoko* and Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*," Carretta deals with his use of these two works in order to analyse the definitions of concepts such as race, identity, status, slavery, and abolition both historically as well as geographically.

Finally, the volume concludes with the four chapters included in Authorial Contexts, which deals with the relationship between Behn and her works. In “The Early Modern Body in Behn’s Poetry and *Oroonoko*,” Martin explains how to approach *Oroonoko* through Behn’s poetry and through both the traditional humoral body and the new science. Anderson’s “*Oroonoko* and the Problem of Teaching Novelty” describes how he makes the unfamiliar accessible to readers or students by teaching *Oroonoko* together with other examples of Behn’s short fiction. Milling and Richards’s “Transatlantic Crossing: Teaching *Oroonoko* with *The Widow Ranter*” focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of pairing these two works. Finally, Spencer regards this work as an indication of Behn’s inclusion in the canon in the early twenty-first century in “Behn and the Canon.”

Considering the two main parts this volume is split up into and the different sections of each of its parts, *Approaches to Teaching Behn’s Oroonoko* can be regarded as a major source of information and/or inspiration for all those instructors who have to teach this novel. Nevertheless, this work can also be very useful for students or for readers who are just interested in broadening their knowledge of Behn’s novel. In fact, Richards and O’Donnell’s volume stands out for its perspicuity in spite of the complexity of the different questions relating to the novel and the scholarly concepts it is crammed with. In all, *Approaches to Teaching Behn’s Oroonoko* will become a must for those who are proficient in reading Behn’s prose-fiction and for those who would like to face the challenge of reading Behn’s *Oroonoko* for the first time.

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