

6-18-2020

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Recommended Citation

Gavis, Meghan (2020) "Narrator's Attitudes Toward Slavery in Oroonoko and Robinson Crusoe," *The Criterion*: Vol. 2020 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/criterion/vol2020/iss1/7>

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Narrator's Attitudes Toward Slavery in *Oroonoko* and *Robinson Crusoe*

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O*roonoko* by Aphra Behn and *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe feature depictions of “primitive” cultures and slavery in South America during English imperialism. *Oroonoko* is narrated by a voice resembling Aphra Behn’s as she details the enslavement of the titular African prince. *Robinson Crusoe* is written as an autobiography of the titular character as he is marooned on an island for twenty-eight years. Each narrator functions as a sentimental or practical voice, sustained by the details of their narratives. These voices develop relationships with primitive individuals and insert perceptual filters into the environments of their enslavement. Behn’s narrator and Crusoe’s personal relationships with the primitive are filtered through their respective romantic and practical lenses, showing how perspective influences evaluations of slavery.

Behn’s use of biographical form implies an alteration between Oroonoko’s story and the narrated version. Instead of framing Oroonoko’s story as a personal narrative, Behn uses biographical form, with a narrator that witnesses some events and receives the remainder from the subject. The introduction of an involved narrator creates an intrinsic filter through which Oroonoko’s story must pass. As a European woman relaying an African man’s story, Behn’s narrator effects even greater filtration, as their perspectives are separated by culture and gender. Though she tries to combat this by stating that her account relates the truth “without the addition of invention,” she also admits to omitting details she deems irrelevant to the narrative (Behn 9). She skims over more masculine aspects of Oroonoko’s story, like his triumphs in war. Though she relates how the Prince became general of his army, she vaguely relays his successive victories, only mentioning briefly “the wars (which were now ended)” (16). The use of parentheses presents the wars as a minor detail, an omitted “little accident” of Oroonoko’s life (9).

Behn’s focus on romantic details establishes her narrator as sentimental. Behn’s narrator marvels at the tender exchanges between the South American natives, and intricately describes their “dying for love” and “blushing modesty” (Behn 11). This thorough narrative has little to do with Oroonoko himself but is awarded exceedingly more description than the brief mention of his battles, signaling the speaker’s sentimental interpretation. She sustains her romantic perspective through her description of Oroonoko and Imoinda’s lovemaking scene. The narrator had refrained from declaring her personal voice in

accounting the Prince's life in Africa, as she was not a witness to those events. However, she inserts her voice into the intimate event: "I believe she was not long resisting those arms where she so longed to be" (29). By interjecting her beliefs, the speaker displays a sensitivity to the narrative, almost as if she could not refrain from commenting on the romantic scene. The presence of opinion subtly undermines her promise to relay the truth without embellishment, but she makes an exception for sentiment's sake.

Crusoe's practical narrative is affirmed through autobiographical form and the recurring presence of quantification in his narrative. Unlike Oroonoko, Crusoe narrates his own story, eliminating the possibility of external alteration. His narrative accurately depicts his story as he sees it, but the events of Crusoe's life are interpreted by his practical mentality before being exhibited to the reader. General impressions of Crusoe characterize him as a sensible man: instead of wallowing in his misfortunes indefinitely, he fixates on survival and salvages every resource possible, down to fragments of wood from his shipwreck. He epitomizes the "self-made man," not only surviving on the island but devising how to construct every tool he could need. His practicality is manifested in his diligent recordkeeping of his time of the island. Crusoe carefully preserves his sense of time by notching a "Kalender" into a tree (Defoe 48). He presents a precise timeline for his life's events, painstakingly recording his daily actions in his journal. He even records months' worth of scavenging and building that he had already explained, suggesting that he highly values explicit documentation. Numbers are present throughout the narrative as Crusoe consistently quantifies time, resources, and events on the island. His meticulous counting is most jarring in his account of those killed in a battle on the island, noting the number of people killed by each man in each location: "2 Kill'd by Friday in the Boat" (171). Crusoe's impulse to quantify is enacted by the recurring presence of money in his narrative: he salvages "eleven hundred" pieces of eight and "six Doubloons of [g]old" from the Spanish shipwreck, even though he has no need for money on the island (139). Though it may be argued that Crusoe's devotion to Christianity undermines his practical perspectives, he principally uses religion in a logical manner. After acknowledging the practical benefit of having a slave, Crusoe justifies his decision to rescue Friday as a "call ... by Providence," twisting his religious commitment to align with his rational desires (146).

Behn's narrator's romantic evaluation of Oroonoko reveals how her Western standards allow her to distinguish him from other natives. The speaker's account of Oroonoko's noble qualities fixates on his pleasing appearance:

[h]is face was not of the brown, rusty black which most of his nation are, but a perfect ebony or polished jet ... His nose was rising and Roman instead of African and flat. His mouth, the finest shaped that could be seen, far from those great turned lips which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes (Behn 15).

The speaker depicts the Prince from a womanly perspective, romantically illustrating his "perfect" features. Her tender description is tailored to

Oroonoko's departures from typical African traits and she praises him for his fulfillment of European standards. The narrator strikes at African characteristics in her severe comparison of Oroonoko's "polished" jet skin to the "rusty" brown-black of his native people. The narrator also appraises Oroonoko by his wit, citing his skill for "diverting" discourse (14). She enhances her evaluation by claiming the "most illustrious courts could not have produced a braver man, both for greatness and courage of mind, a judgment more solid [and] a wit more quick" (14). Her extensive praise culminates in the assertion that he is fit to rule wisely over the prestigious institutions unable to breed his equal. Her overabundant praise of the Prince's merit suggests that Behn's narrator acknowledges a significance in her claims — that she is surprised to have found a black man that overcame the "barbarity of his nature" and needs to completely convince her readers (15). Her evaluation is not solely based on merit but is grounded in contrasting Oroonoko with his "nature," suggesting that she only values him for likeness to Europeans. Though the narrator insists that he transcends them, native and Western models qualify Oroonoko's greatness — models that she adamantly establishes and vehemently raises the Prince above.

Unlike Behn's narrator's sentimental evaluation, Crusoe assesses natives based on their usefulness and willingness to convert to his preferences. Crusoe's initial appraisal of Friday originates from his ability to protect Crusoe from the threat of cannibals. He values Friday's "dexterous" ability with a bow and arrow and the insight he offers about the neighboring "savages" (Defoe 152). Friday become more valuable to Crusoe as his survival capabilities become evident. Crusoe praises Friday's quick study of building and farming, relishing his "ability to do all the work for [Crusoe], as well as [he] could do it [him]self" (154). This sense of Friday's practical worth is bolstered by his willingness to adapt to Crusoe's lifestyle. Crusoe endeavors to teach Friday the skills "to make him useful, handy, and helpful" (152). He expresses his "delight" at Friday's diligent efforts to learn English, calling him the "aptest Scholar that ever was" (152). Crusoe seems to value the minimal effort he exerts to teach Friday and the rewards he receives from Friday's work — cherishing the ease with which he can assimilate. Even his evaluation of Friday's physical appearance shows appreciation for integration:

the Colour of his Skin was not quite black, but very tawny; and yet not of an ugly yellow nauseous tawny, ... but of a bright kind of dun olive Colour, that had in it something very agreeable" (149).

By describing Friday's countenance as "agreeable" as opposed to "nauseous," Crusoe suggests that Friday's value stems from the absence of offense. Unlike Behn's sentimental narrator, Crusoe does not assess Friday as a person of merit but as a tool that yields the most benefits and the least affronts.

Behn's narrator's transformative relationship with Oroonoko exhibits her capacity to sympathize with a slave. As Oroonoko grew impatient waiting to be freed from slavery, the narrator felt "obliged" to satisfy him, by fear that he

would incite a mutiny among other slaves (Behn 48). Though she feels compelled to do so, she enjoys diverting him by imparting her knowledge: “I entertained him with the lives of Romans, and great men, which charmed him to my company, and ... endeavor[ed] to bring [him] to the knowledge of the true God” (49). The extent to which she “endeavors” to teach “all things [she is] capable of” suggests the speaker earnestly tutors Oroonoko, instead of distracting him with frivolities (49). This teacher-student relationship evolves into one of mutual discourse, as Oroonoko rejects the teachings of Christianity. He refuses to believe the concept of the Trinity, deeming it a “jest” (49). Instead of typifying an oppressive lecturer, the narrator does not reprove Oroonoko’s dismissal of Christianity and welcomes his unrestrained discourse. She seems to promote the exchange of ideas as, to recount the Prince’s life, he must have communicated his story. Through free discussion, the sentimental speaker forms a companionship with Oroonoko, and she eventually regards him with love. Their dynamic relationship culminates in the narrator’s sympathetic view of Oroonoko’s enslavement, falling into an “extraordinary melancholy” at his sadness and death (75).

In stark contrast, Crusoe’s immediate implementation of a master-servant relationship with Friday shows his view that the native is ignorant and must be mastered. Crusoe’s first glimpse of the naked, scared native yields expressions of an “irresistible” desire for a servant, disguised as a Providential call to “save [the] poor Creature’s life” (Defoe 146). Even less personal than his appraisal of Friday’s usefulness, this judgment is based off appearance alone, suggesting Crusoe’s intrinsic idea that native “creatures” are inferior to himself. Crusoe enacts Friday’s slavery immediately after his rescue by designating himself as “Master” and the native as “Friday” (149). Not only does Crusoe bypass Friday’s given name to assign him an English one, but he neglects to give him a real name, signifying his belief that Friday is unworthy of a proper title. Though Crusoe, like Behn’s narrator, establishes a teacher-student relationship between himself and Friday, his teachings center upon practicality and conversion. He teaches Friday what makes him useful but also dispels the “fraud” of Friday’s religious beliefs, calling him a “most blinded ignorant Pagan” (157). This admonishment of Friday’s ignorance contrasts the sentimental speaker’s discourse-based teachings. He further departs from Behn’s narrator in his censorship of discussion: when Friday challenges the notion of the Devil, Crusoe dismisses him by concocting a sudden reason to end his lesson. Unlike Behn’s narrator, Crusoe’s relationship with Friday is static, maintaining the practical value of Friday’s enslavement and the native’s ignorance compared to Crusoe’s righteousness.

Both Crusoe and Behn’s narrator accept the general practice of slavery with a practical perspective, despite the latter’s expressed sentimental values. Crusoe maintains his characteristic practicality in relation to slavery. He considers it a tool to simplify life, shown in his education of Friday on how to “make him

useful,” to survive more efficiently (Defoe 152). He even considers his own enslavement before landing on the island a matter of practicality. He does not condemn his enslavement as immoral but regards the situation as one to rationally escape. Crusoe seems unsentimental to himself in his circumstance, indicating his acceptance of slavery as a practical tool, utilized or escaped by those capable. Similarly, Behn’s narrator does not condemn slavery but acknowledges its practical benefits. Concealed by her characteristic romanticism, the narrator attributes peace between the South American natives and English to necessity: “So that they being, on all occasions very useful to us, we find it absolutely necessary to caress them as friends, and not to treat them as slaves; nor dare we do other, their number so far surpassing ours in that continent” (Behn 12). Behn’s narrator admires the natives, yet only refrains from enslaving them out of “absolut[e] necess[ity].” When she later details the process of the slave trade, she does so apathetically — nothing romantic in her evaluation of “twenty pound a head” (Behn 12). The narrator ultimately shows her acceptance in her refusal to condemn the dishonest captain’s capture of Oroonoko. She moves to “spare her sense of it,” as to let the readers decide whether the captain was honorable, but her silence translates to a quiet permission of slavery (Behn 33). Her sentimental perspective has no jurisdiction over a “practical” matter.

While they both accept the general practice of slavery, Crusoe maintains a rigid social hierarchy and Behn’s narrator believes the system can be overcome. Crusoe views slavery as a practical tool but harbors innate ideas of a social hierarchy. This is exemplified by Crusoe’s intervention with the cannibalistic ritual of the natives. Despite his resolve to observe without interference, when Crusoe realizes that a white Spaniard will be slaughtered, he hastens to rescue the “poor Christian” (Defoe 169). Crusoe only interferes to prevent the butchering of a European, unveiling his innate social hierarchy, as he deems a white man worthy of life, but not a South American. Behn’s narrator affirms this hierarchy by accepting the enslavement of “typical” Africans while she considers Oroonoko above the confines of servitude. Her romantic evaluation of him and their dynamic companionship lead to her sympathetic view of Oroonoko’s enslavement and she asserts his “worth[iness] of a better fate” (Behn 76). This belief stems from the development of a sentimental companionship, but also a fixation on Western standards. The speaker distinguishes Oroonoko from slavery by separating him from other Africans, in feature and demeanor. By glorifying Oroonoko in conjunction with his differences from “the Negroes” — noticeably not “the other Negroes” — the narrator maintains that only those who surpass African qualities could be worthy of freedom. Nevertheless, Behn’s narrator believes that slavery can be transcended while Crusoe maintains a rigid hierarchy. Despite Friday’s diligent conversion to Crusoe’s values, Crusoe never frees him from slavery. While the sentimental narrator sympathizes with the Western slave, Crusoe never relents his practical view — no amount of companionship or conversion could make Friday worth saving.

Through their respective lenses, the sentimental and practical narrators present their perspectives as the moral truth. Though the speakers present vastly different narratives, the perspectives have underlying commonalities. They both acknowledge practical benefits to slavery, discarding romanticism. But Behn's narrator's view of slaves as dynamic humans, as opposed to tools, facilitates sympathy that outweighs practicality. Perhaps if Behn's narrator had developed a relationship with every slave, she would detect familiar qualities among all of them and acknowledge them as human beings worth saving; this may be true of Imperial England as a whole. But it seems the social hierarchy is too convenient, too ingrained to completely discard. It is always underlying, in even the most sentimental perspectives. There are limitations of human sympathy: though one slave could be redeemed in the eyes of morality, the generalized slave population could not.

Bibliography

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