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Aphra Behn's surinam interlude

Abstract
Aphra Behn's relatively obscure literary reputation is not so much a result of the vagaries of fate as it is the product of an effort to discredit her literary career at a time when considerable interest in Behn's canon was exhibited in England and in the United States. It is the purpose of this essay to review what I call the Behn-Bernbaum case in order to demonstrate that the primary ground upon which the campaign against Behn rested is untrue. It has not required very strenuous research to compare the texts of Behn's Oroonoko with George Warren's An Impartial Description of Surinam in order to discover the lack of similarity between the two pieces; however, twentieth-century editors have preferred to accept without question Ernest Bernbaum's accusation that Behn had 'stolen' her Oroonoko materials from Warren rather than to suspect the querulous tones in which Bernbaum's judgments against Behn were issued.
Aphra Behn’s relatively obscure literary reputation is not so much a result of the vagaries of fate as it is the product of an effort to discredit her literary career at a time when considerable interest in Behn’s canon was exhibited in England and in the United States. It is the purpose of this essay to review what I call the Behn-Bernbaum case in order to demonstrate that the primary ground upon which the campaign against Behn rested is untrue. It has not required very strenuous research to compare the texts of Behn’s *Oroonoko* with George Warren’s *An Impartial Description of Surinam* in order to discover the lack of similarity between the two pieces; however, twentieth-century editors have preferred to accept without question Ernest Bernbaum’s accusation that Behn had ‘stolen’ her *Oroonoko* materials from Warren rather than to suspect the querulous tones in which Bernbaum’s judgments against Behn were issued.

My contention is that the unique inspiration for *Oroonoko* was derived from Aphra Behn’s short residence in Surinam. In the absence of a firm and reliable biography, the Surinam sojourn is clouded by conjecture as are Behn’s experiences as a royal agent in Holland, and, what is even more perplexing, the details of her parentage. Her origins have been reviewed by various biographers and the results are confusing. For example, the Countess of Winchilsea, Anne Finch, roughly contemporary with Behn, in a handwritten note stated that ‘Mrs Behn was Daughter to a Barber, who liv’d formerly in Wye.... Though the account of her life before her Works pretends otherwise; some Persons now alive Do testify upon their Knowledge that to be her Original.’ This note

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For I have heard that most of that which bears the name of learning, and which has abused such quantities of ink and paper, and continually employs so many ignorant unhappy souls for ten, twelve, twenty years in the university (who yet, poor wretches, think they are doing something all the while) — as logic, etc. and several other things (that shall be ‘nameless, lest I should misspell them) — are much more absolutely nothing than the errantest play that e’er was writ.

*Aphra Behn, The Dutch Lover, 1673.*
sufficed as authority for Sir Edmund Gosse (in an article published in the 6 September 1884 issue of Athenaeum) whose faith in the accuracy of Finch's information led to the attack by Bernbaum upon the authenticity of Behn's Surinam experiences and of her use of them in Oroonoko. Professor Bernbaum contended that a barber would never have received an appointment as Lieutenant-General of Surinam, that Behn never lived in the West Indies, and that her conception of Oroonoko was fictitious. Behn's deft and determined manipulation of verisimilitude lies at the core of Bernbaum's attack. His hypothesis was that if one could prove Behn went to Surinam, then Oroonoko might be based on fact and could be authentic. If, on the other hand, Bernbaum could demonstrate that Behn never visited Surinam, Oroonoko would be simply a work of the imagination supported by Behn's myriad forms of verisimilitude. That the novella could be considered a work of greater creativity if it were entirely fictional was a consideration lost in Bernbaum's preoccupation with Behn's veracity. And although it is basically immaterial whether Behn's verisimilitude in Oroonoko is founded upon fact or upon imagination, it is important to realize that Bernbaum's charges of mendacity damaged Behn's literary reputation.

Parental identity is not the sole problem of Behn's biography. Her husband's identity is another, but the mystery that concerns us most surrounds her Surinam years. The tangle regarding her parentage relates directly to the authenticity of her Surinam experiences. Behn says in Oroonoko that her father died during the sea voyage to South America. If he did not live to fill his post, then there could be no official documents from the colony bearing his name or giving an account of his activities. Neither are there documents from a succeeding British administrator because Surinam changed from British to Dutch jurisdiction shortly after the time when Behn's family might have been there. As the ship bearing Aphra and her family to the new post in the West Indies would continue to its destination despite the death of a passenger, the family would have landed in Surinam in an ambiguous situation. If we can rely upon Oroonoko, they were, nevertheless, greeted with consideration and they stayed in the colony.

Surinam was a relatively new British possession at the time of Aphra Behn's youth. An Englishman by the name of Marshall made the first settlement in 1630, and in 1662 Charles II gave the entire colony to Francis Lord Willoughby of Parham. It is believed that Willoughby made two voyages to the West Indies — in 1650 and again in 1663. It is known that he was lost at sea in 1666. There is repeated mention in Oroonoko of the Governor's expected visit, and on that basis it is possible
to conjecture that Behn lived there prior to Willoughby's second visit. Further, in *Oroonoko*, Byam is named as the deputy-governor. William Byam was lieutenant-governor during the years 1662 to 1667, which fact helps place the time of Behn's possible residency. As Behn's letters in the British Government Office prove that she was on an intelligence mission in Antwerp by the summer of 1666, she had evidently left the West Indies before the end of Byam's term of office.

Victoria Sackville-West uncovered an enlightening passage in James Rodway's *Chronological History of the Discovery and Settlement of Guiana*, published in Georgetown, Demerara, in 1888:

Lord Willoughby, having been released from the Tower with permission to proceed to Surinam, deputed a relation of his named Johnson as governor of that colony, and also to look after his lord's interests in the West Indies. Taking with him his wife and children, and also an adopted daughter named Afra or Aphra Johnson, he sailed for Surinam towards the end of this or the beginning of the following year. He did not, however, live to reach his government, but fell sick and died on the voyage. His widow and the children proceeded to Surinam, where they remained for two or three years, living on one of Lord Willoughby's plantations which was under the management of Mr Trefry, who acted as estate attorney for the lord proprietor.

Walter and Clare Jerrold's research discloses that Willoughby was released from the Tower of London in 1656. This date helps place the year of his deputy's voyage to Surinam. If he left England in 1656 or in the beginning of 1657, and if his adopted daughter returned to England sometime after Byam's investiture in 1662 but before 1666 when she was in Antwerp, we might conclude that Aphra Behn would have been in Surinam for about six years. This takes into account the date of Willoughby's second voyage to the West Indies. Until a reliable birthdate is discovered for Behn, it is impossible to state how old she was during these years, but it seems likely that she lived in Surinam during her late teens and her early twenties. Besides aiding the placement of Behn's Surinam residency, the Rodway passage helps to authenticate *Oroonoko*. That the character in the novella (Trefry) who seems most to retain the narrator's trust should be cited by Rodway as an actual historical personage lends extraordinary credibility to Behn's novella — a novella too easily dismissed as the romantic musings of an old woman in London.

Ernest Bernbaum based his charge of mendacity upon the text of *Oroonoko*. He thought it very unlikely, for example, that a party of young colonial men and women would entertain themselves by searching for tiger cubs in the jungle. He was incapable of understanding the vitality of British pioneers. In his paper delivered on the occasion of Professor
George Lyman Kittredge’s silver anniversary as a Harvard faculty member, Bernbaum quibbled that the name of Behn’s hero was not African but was rather an alternate spelling of the great South American Orinoco River. He found it singular that ‘such an obvious slip has not aroused remark’. With an emphasis upon truth in literature that confuses art with reality, Bernbaum only saw in the author’s creation of a fictional name the grounds for questioning her veracity. He could not see that Behn’s adaptation of the Carib word meaning ‘coiled serpent’ into the black prince’s name was a stroke of creative writing. Bernbaum was further annoyed that Behn did not mention the date of Caesar’s captivity in her novella although he was forced to admit that ‘Mrs Behn’s allusions to historical personages and political conditions prove in some respects quite correct’. In fact, the correlation of actuality to fictionalization in the novella far exceeds what ordinarily might be expected in an artistic creation.

There are other arguments that Bernbaum advanced to repudiate Oroonoko, but he rested his case primarily upon a pamphlet entitled An Impartial Description of Surinam which was published in 1667 by George Warren, an Englishman who had lived in Surinam for three years. Bernbaum claimed that this pamphlet provided all the background materials for Oroonoko. He stated that Behn described only what Warren described and that ‘when differences appear, they show Mrs Behn not independently observing but inaccurately amplifying’. Bernbaum cited a description of armadilloes by Warren to which he compared Behn’s description of the same animal. He quoted Warren’s description of the torpedo or numb eel as the source for Behn’s description. He offered a general paragraph from Warren on the inhumane treatment of slaves and then sarcastically queried: ‘Is it not significant that this little outline emphasizes the very traits that constitute the realistic elements on the larger canvas of Mrs Behn?’

Behn’s description of Amerindian dress, ornament, weapons and customs were all credited by Bernbaum to Warren’s descriptions. He merely scoffed at Behn’s remark that she had sent to the King’s Theatre the Indian clothing which had been presented to her. He dismissed this item of verifiable detail with the words, ‘To think of Nell Gwynn in the true costume of a Carib belle is indeed ludicrous.’ George Woodcock points out that Dryden, the co-author of The Indian Queen, was still alive when Oroonoko was published, and he as well as many others could have disputed Behn’s claim that it was the costume she presented that was worn in the production. And, finally, Bernbaum attacked Behn’s description of the Amerindians who came down from the mountains
bearing gold dust as just one more echo of the Elizabethan search for El Dorado. Although the gold of Central and South America was plundered by the early European explorers and adventurers, there is still, in the twentieth century, alluvial gold in the mountain streams of the Surinam interior. Without a Bernbaum biography we do not know if the Harvard professor ever visited the West Indies or the Spanish Main, but his sketchy knowledge of the area seems limited to what he could glean from old colonial histories.

Actual comparison of the texts of Oroonoko and of the rare Impartial Description of Surinam reveals that Bernbaum’s accusation is untrue. Some examples from Warren’s work illustrate the falsity of Bernbaum’s charge that what was included by Warren was used by Behn with the associated implication that what was missing in Warren was likewise missing in Behn. Warren’s first chapter describes Toorarica as the chief town of the British colony. Behn uses neither the name nor the description, but, instead, employs her own geographic orientation. Warren notes the many cataracts and waterfalls of the Suriname River and mentions the sport of cataract shooting. Behn, whom Bernbaum slanders as ‘romantic and sensational’, does not include this exciting detail in Oroonoko. Warren’s enumeration of provisions includes yams, plantains and cassander, not any of which Behn notes, and he describes the planters’ use of cooling sugar drinks which Behn ignores. He lists tortoises and beef and remarks that the hogs do not increase because the bats bite off the nursing mothers’ teats. This curious detail does not appear in Oroonoko although the Kittredge paper maintains: ‘The only animals in connection with which Mrs Behn relates any incidents are the «tiger» and the electric eel; the same is true of Warren.’ Warren’s work describes the howling and screeching of the tropical birds and Behn’s realistic detailing does not mention this item. Nor does she use Warren’s lengthy explanation of the peculiar type of local hare caught for food. Warren’s enthusiastic expression of his personal preference for pineapples over guavas, bananas, oranges, limons and femerrimars is missing from Behn’s story. Particularly remarkable is his description of an apple tree transplanted from Europe which observed the changes of the seasons despite the lack of significant seasonal change in Surinam. This curiosity appears nowhere in Behn’s novella. In summation, there is little material in Warren’s pamphlet which does appear in Oroonoko. The scant parallels were carefully collected by Bernbaum and exhibited as representative. They constitute only a few items that could have been observed by any visitor to Surinam and they hardly establish Warren’s pamphlet as the definitive source for Oroonoko.
Bernbaum's campaign against Behn was continued in a second paper entitled 'Mrs Behn's Biography A Fiction'. His penchant for citing himself as authority is also evident therein: 'The absolute untrustworthiness of the first of these sources [Behn's autobiographical statements in Oroonoko and The Fair Jilt] has recently been revealed, however, by the discovery that Mrs Behn in Oroonoko deliberately and circumstantially lied.' The source for this 'discovery' is footnoted as his own prior paper on Oroonoko. The second paper is riddled with such pejorative comments as: 'Indeed, since Mrs Behn's autobiographic remarks are untrustworthy...', 'Mrs Behn's pretended journey to Surinam', 'her description of the colony was stolen from George Warren's Impartial Description of Surinam', 'Mrs Behn's frequent falsehoods in Oroonoko', and 'Today we know that she never was in Surinam...'. As H.A. Hargreaves says regarding Bernbaum's vocabulary: 'This was rather strong language', and one wonders what priorities the MLA supported in 1913 to cause it to print such strident prose.

That no scholar appears to have examined the Warren pamphlet for verification is lamentable, but that succeeding scholars have permitted themselves to be influenced by Bernbaum's rhetoric is unconscionable. An early example of Bernbaum's influence appears in Arthur Tieje's Theory of Characterization in Prose Fiction Prior to 1740 in which Tieje cites Madame Scudéry as anticipating 'the now much-admired opening of Behn's Oroonoko, wherein that mendacious «realist» [Tieje's quotation marks] expounds the distinction between Moors and negroes'. The fact that Tieje's book was published soon after Bernbaum's two papers along with his use of the particular word 'mendacious' points to Bernbaum's authority. Another example of Bernbaum's influence, this time from a British publication, states: 'It is believed, on good authority, that Mrs Behn collected the «facts» [Henderson's quotation marks] and the local colour, which is inaccurate in some points, for her novel Oroonoko from books and acquaintances in London.' The 'good authority' to which this 1930 work refers is Professor Bernbaum, the first critic to claim that Behn never lived in Surinam. Bernbaum next published The Mary Carleton Narratives in which he 'proved' the non-existence of a Mary Carleton upon whose alleged biography some Restoration writings had been based. The Carleton book contains the author's irrelevant assertion that 'It has lately become known that the supposedly autobiographical portions of Mrs Behn's Oroonoko are mendacious'. The basis for this information is footnoted as Bernbaum's own publication of 1913.

Bernbaum's influence has not exhausted itself; it persists in current literary evaluations of Behn as in the introduction to a new, papercover
edition of *Oroonoko* published in 1973. In a parenthetical aside, the editor faults Behn: ‘Like many of her contemporaries, Mrs Behn does not distinguish between Negro and Moor, freely mixing African and Oriental habits.’ This comment reflects Tieje’s post-Bernbaum comment on *Oroonoko* but it has also become a commonplace of modern criticism. Actually, neither Shakespeare nor Behn were so ignorant as some later day literary commentators would make them out to be. The Islamic black tribes of Northern and Western Africa could well have produced an Othello or an Oroonoko. Elizabethan and Restoration literary creations of black Moors were not necessarily the result of cultural confusion. But Bernbaum set the fashion of denigrating Behn’s reliability and here Lore Metzger follows the fashion with a hackneyed observation.

Not to be outdone by Bernbaum’s argument that Behn raided George Warren’s *An Impartial Description of Surinam* for all the descriptive details Behn used in *Oroonoko*, Ruth T. Sheffey in 1962 saw fit to propose ‘Some Evidence for a New Source of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*’. Writing in *Studies in Philology*, Sheffey credits Bernbaum with having ‘discovered’ Warren’s pamphlet: ‘a work striking in the similarity of its passages descriptive of the flora and fauna of the province to *Oroonoko*.’ Like other Bernbaum disciples, Sheffey did not pause to examine Warren’s pamphlet nor to compare it carefully with Behn’s novella. She continues:

An analysis of these parallel passages led Bernbaum to conclude that we must abandon the idea that Mrs Behn actually saw Surinam and knew *Oroonoko*. Moreover, he maintained that the details in the historical background were provided by the contemporary accounts occasioned by the war with the Dutch and that the rest of the local colour was taken directly from the Warren account, Mrs Behn’s regular method being an exotic transmutation of Warren’s report.

Sheffey concludes: ‘For today, after almost fifty years, the conclusion that Mrs Behn had probably never seen Surinam is still incontrovertible.’ Needless to say, the ‘incontrovertibility’ of the conclusion has not been demonstrated. But in order to promote another source for *Oroonoko*, Sheffey relegates Behn’s experience to the category of myth — an unscholarly solution to a research problem. She proposes Thomas Tryon’s *Friendly Advice to the Gentleman-Planters of the East and West Indies* not only as the source of information which Behn used to write *Oroonoko*, but also for the ‘vigour of the humanitarian statement in *Oroonokoo*’. The cruelty of Sheffey’s effort extends beyond the fact that she follows Bernbaum’s lead in order to introduce her own proposition. She goes beyond repudiating Behn’s veracity to strip from Behn credit for the very senti-
ments that illuminate *Oroonoko*. Whether Sheffey’s proposition has any validity is not the concern of this essay. Its concern is that Sheffey should find it necessary to stand upon Bernbaum’s flawed foundation in order to introduce her own thesis.

It is ironic that the contemptuous attitude towards Behn’s writing that Bernbaum promoted should travel from Boston to the West Indies. Prior to the 1970 appearance of Kenneth Ramchand’s *The West Indian Novel and its Background*, the Ramchand anthology *West Indian Narrative* was published ‘to take the West Indian writer into the West Indian schoolroom and into the homes of West Indian schoolchildren’. The anthology opens with a selection from *Oroonoko* accompanied by a reproduction of Sir Peter Lely’s portrait of Aphra Behn and a two-page commentary upon Behn’s execution of the novella. In a manner which is by now painfully familiar, Ramchand denigrates Behn’s achievement:

Mrs Behn wrote with a great deal of sympathy for oppressed Negroes, but in the story, the hero is so perfect and the events so spectacular that we, today, recognize the tale as sheer invention.... In inventing an African hero, she makes him an ideal European courtier. He is a scholar, a linguist, a soldier of great valour, a gentleman and a prince. This suggests that although Behn believed that a black African could be a prince, a scholar, a soldier and a gentleman, Ramchand might not.

Ramchand’s faulting of Caesar or *Oroonoko* as foolishly romantic in conception is not a new charge. For example, George Woodcock was dissatisfied with the characterization because

his typical Negroid characteristics are purged almost wholly away in adapting him to the traditional hero. His face, although black, is Roman in contour, his hair is straightened artificially to hang to his shoulders like a periwig ... in general he shows the exaggerated chivalry and endurance which were the attributes of the heroes who had figured in romances since the late middle ages.

On the other hand, Evangeline Blashfield looked past the physical characteristics of the hero and found that *Oroonoko* was not a white man painted black. ‘There still was much that was fierce and untamed in Aphra’s hero.... He was not the gentle savage who illustrated the superiority of Nature over civilization, dear to the eighteenth-century philosophers.’ Blashfield’s intuitive insight is supported by Wylie Sypher’s more rigorous scholarship. Having studied the British slave trade for his book *Guinea’s Captive Kings*, Sypher wrote ‘A Note on the Realism of Mrs Behn’s *Oroonoko*’ in which he examines Behn’s assertion
that both Imoinda and Oroonoko came from Coramantien. Sypher identifies the Koromantin tribes as chiefly Akims, Fantins, Ashantees and Quamboos and says that ‘no one unacquainted with the diverse characters of Negro slaves is likely to have embodied in Oroonoko precisely those traits which differentiate the «Koromantin» from all other Gold-Coast Negroes’.

Sypher cites Bryan Edwards in describing the Koromantin black as different from all others in ‘firmness both in body and mind; a ferociousness of disposition; but withal, activity, courage and a stubbornness ... of soul ... which enables them to meet death, in its most horrible shape, with fortitude or indifference’. Edward Long (History of Jamaica, 1774), described the Koromantins as being ‘well made, and their features are very different from the rest of the African Negroes, being smaller, and more of the European turn. Their dances serve to keep alive that military spirit, for which they are so distinguished’. Further reports of the specific characteristics of the Koromantins are offered by Sypher from the St. Christopher island physician James Grainger, Antiguan planter Christopher Codrington, and Vathek Beckford’s father William Beckford, the owner of Jamaican sugar estates. All these first-hand witnesses to Koromantin physical and behavioral traits draw a portrait strikingly similar to that of Behn’s hero. Sypher concludes in rebuttal to Bernbaum: ‘one has the impression that if Mrs Behn did not draw on personal observation, she must have relied upon sources reaching well beyond Warren.’

Professor Bernbaum spotted the structural interest of Oroonoko in his remark, ‘If we ask why Mrs Behn writes romantically about Coramantian, and realistically about Surinam, we are reminded that she had visited the latter country but not the former’. Derisively stated, the remark nonetheless contains an essential truth. Oroonoko comes alive when the action moves from the African Gold Coast to the interior of Surinam. The first portion of the novella resembles Behn’s twelve other prose fictions with the exception that the cast is predominantly black. The African tribal court depicted in the first section is as stylized as the settings of Behn’s continental fictions while the second part of Oroonoko vibrates with the colours, sounds, scents and activity of the West Indian equatorial forest. But the excellence of the novella depends not so much upon whether it had a basis in actual fact as upon its superb execution and its transcendental quality of compassion. It will prevail despite the sexual chauvinism of critics like Bernbaum and the racial assumptions of critics like Woodcock. However, Bernbaum’s charges of mendacity and plagiarism must be categorically denied so that contemporary critics will
not continue to pattern their commentary upon his flawed methodology. Only then will the new feminist critics like Maureen Duffy and Angeline Goreau be successful in ‘Reconstructing Aphra’. 23

NOTES

1. Angeline Goreau claims that those critics ‘who chose to argue with him concentrated on comparison of the two texts’ (Warren’s and Behn’s); then she questions such a technique. I argue that, to the contrary, neither Bernbaum’s critics nor his supporters compared the two texts; they simply assumed that Bernbaum had reported upon them accurately. In other words, his critics questioned Bernbaum’s conclusions but not his scholarship. In fact, both were flawed. See Angeline Goreau, Reconstructing Aphra (New York: The Dial Press, 1980), p. 43.


5. Ernest Bernbaum, ‘Mrs Behn’s Oronoko’, Kittredge Anniversary Papers (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1913). This and all the Bernbaum citations in the surrounding three paragraphs are from the Kittredge paper.


7. Bernbaum and I doubtlessly both worked from the Boston copy of the Warren pamphlet; consequently, edition variations cannot be invoked to explain the discrepancy between what the writer found the Warren pamphlet to contain and what Bernbaum reported it to contain.


Aphra Behn (1640–1689) was the first woman in England to earn a living by writing. She claimed her right not only to work on equal terms with men but as Lore Metzger writes 'to include in both her private life and public work the same right to social and artistic proprieties and improprieties that Restoration London accorded to male dramatists'.