Chapter 2

VIOLENCE AND AWE: THE FOUNDATIONS OF GOVERNMENT IN APHRA BEHN’S NEW WORLD SETTINGS

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A prolific and successful poet, playwright, and novelist, Aphra Behn (1640-1689) holds the distinction of being the first English woman to earn a living off the proceeds of her writing. Her popularity among her contemporaries carried over into the eighteenth century, and her collected works went through eight editions by 1735. Behn’s prose works eventually fell out of favor with scholars—the writer of the entry on Behn in the Dictionary of National Biography calls her prose works “decidedly less meritorious than her drama and the best of her poems.” Yet, this judgment obscures the fact that it was Behn’s Oroonoko, a novella, that contributed more than any other single work to the formation of her literary reputation among her contemporaries. (The renown of Behn’s Oroonoko increased in 1695 when it was transformed into a successful play by Thomas Southerner.) In recent decades, Behn’s Oroonoko has once again become popular with readers, and has generated a new body of criticism and scholarship. An indication of Oroonoko’s success with today’s readers and its increasing status in the canon of English literature is its recent inclusion in the sixth edition of the Norton Anthology of British Literature (Vol. I).

Behn presents Oroonoko to her readers as “The History of the Royal Slave;” and she claims to have witnessed many of the events she depicts during a prolonged sojourn in the English Royalist colony of Surinam: “I was myself an Eye-Witness to a great part of what you will find here set down.” Although her contemporaries never questioned the veracity of her narrative, some twentieth-century scholars have, most notably Ernest...
Bernbaum, who declared Behn a "liar" who never traveled to Surinam, but instead took her details about the colony from contemporary accounts, such as George Warren's *An Impartial Description of Surinam* (1667). More recently, however, various scholars, including Behn's three biographers, have determined that external evidence available in a variety of colonial records indicates that Behn did indeed travel to Surinam. Although the records are not conclusive, it is probable that Behn traveled there in the fall of 1663 and remained there until early in 1664, during which time she experienced, in some form, the events she depicts in her novella.

The purpose of Behn's journey is a matter of speculation. In the preface to *Oroonoko*, Behn states that her father was taking their family to Surinam where he was to assume the post of lieutenant-general (48); Duffy suggests that Behn's father may have been nominated as captain general, rather than lieutenant, or that he may have been responding to an appeal for planters to travel to Surinam. More recently, Janet Todd has suggested that Behn, who would have been in her early twenties at the time, may have gone to Surinam "as a spy or agent" of the government; Behn later served Charles II in such a capacity when she was sent to Antwerp during the Dutch war. The relationship of fact to fiction in Behn's *Oroonoko* cannot be settled conclusively in many points, but the same is true of many of the European accounts of the New World that proliferated in the late seventeenth century. When approached from a different angle, Behn's *Oroonoko* presents the reader and scholar with many issues in addition to the question of the veracity of its details. *Oroonoko* is, like other New World accounts, an emplotment and narration of experience; as such, it constructs and invents, as well as describes, the New World that is its setting. In particular, Behn's narrative puts much energy into imagining the forms and qualities of just colonial governance in the New World. In this essay, I argue that Behn's perspective on colonial governance in the Americas can be understood largely in terms of her royalist sympathies.

In 1975, George Guffey called attention to the political topicality of *Oroonoko*, finding in it evidence of Behn's avid Toryism and parallels to the issues leading up to the Glorious Revolution. Recently, political readings of Behn's novel have become more frequent, though they constitute a different kind of political reading, attending to the ideological issues of race, class, and gender. *Oroonoko* is resituated in its colonial context and attention is focused on colonial politics, slavery, trade, and gender. Such work makes clear that Behn's New World setting is more than a vehicle for com-