

Choice of genre in Aphra Behn's Oroonoko

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Este artículo estudia la cuestión de por qué una escritora de obras de teatro como Aphra Behn (1640-1689) decidió escribir en prosa una historia con tales posibilidades dramáticas como *Oroonoko* (1688).

En general, los críticos que han tratado el tema de un modo u otro han señalado sus acuciantes problemas económicos y profesionales, así como el hecho de que, al no haber recibido la misma educación que los escritores contemporáneos de ella, podía competir con ellos en términos de mayor igualdad escribiendo una novela, pues se trataba de una forma literaria nueva, libre de cualquier tradición, y abierta a las mujeres tanto como lectoras como escritoras. Pero estos argumentos no parecen enteramente satisfactorios, y hacen preciso un nuevo análisis.

Un estudio comparativo de *Oroonoko* y la tragedia de Thomas Southerne basada en ella y publicada en 1696 con el mismo título demuestra que, al elegir el género de su obra, Behn se vio influenciada principalmente por sus objetivos, las convenciones literarias vigentes, y los cambios epistemológicos, éticos y estéticos que se estaban desarrollando a finales del siglo diecisiete.

When the Restoration dramatist Thomas Southerne published his tragedy *Oroonoko* in 1696, he resolved to dedicate it to His Grace William, Duke of Devonshire. In the «Epistle Dedicatory», he acknowledges his debt to Aphra Behn and recognizes not having done the same in another of his plays¹. He praises her and writes:

«She had a great command of the stage, and I have often wondered that she would bury her favourite hero in a novel, when she might have revived him in the scene. She thought either that no actor could represent him, or she could not bear him represented. And I believe the last when I remember what I have heard from a friend of hers, that she always told his

story, more feelingly, than she writ it. Whatever happened to him at Surinam, he has mended his condition in England»².

Leaving aside the question of whether Mrs Behn «buried» Oroonoko on recounting his life in a «novel» or not, I think that what underlies Southerne's question is the interesting and difficult problem of genre choice. Why did a dramatist like Aphra Behn write in prose a story with such dramatic possibilities? And, as this was not exceptional in her work, why did she present some stories in plays and others in narratives? It is my opinion that Behn wrote her «History of the Royal Slave» instead of «a Tragedy» because her aims were different from Southerne's, and she surely thought she could «revive» Oroonoko much better in a «novel» than in a heroic tragedy or even in a traditional romance. Either genre would limit her objectives and would mean a different approach to the material, both for her and her public. With a novel she could achieve an impression of authenticity, possibility of editorial comment and judgment, chronological story-telling in a long time span, realism of setting and other descriptive details³. Besides, narrative prose could depict more realistically the inner nature of the protagonist, so that readers could visualize him and get emotionally involved in the action. According to Michael McKeon, «in an age that far more thoroughly and definitively than ever before identifies truth with the evidence of the senses, the unmediated access to «life» itself that dramatic presentation promises to provide us is much too vulnerable to disconfirmation»⁴. Rose A. Zimbardo argues that, at the end of the seventeenth century, a new idiom of representation was required to express a new conception of nature, interior human nature as opposed to schematic cosmic nature⁵. That is one reason for the decline of drama at the end of the seventeenth century. And, if I may add, also a probable reason for Behn to turn to narrative and write one of the landmarks in the transition from romance to the modern conception of the novel.

The question of why Mrs Behn began to write fiction has been answered by many of her critics and biographers in a cool, categorical, although most likely realistic, way by pointing out her pressing financial problems. George Woodcock considers inaccurate Victoria Sackville-West's argument that Mrs Behn withdrew from dramatic writing due to her troubles over the epilogue to *Romulus and Hersilia*, and maintains that the reason for this could be the fact that, at the time, play-writing was not a profitable activity and that it was difficult to obtain loans from theatrical managers⁶. Kristiaan Aерcke, Janet Todd and Paul Salzman also attribute it

to problems in the public theatres⁷. Dale Spender personalizes this argument and asserts that Aphra Behn turned to novel-writing «after wearing thin her theatrical welcome - (...). In her case, (...), the need to write a story in prose form was no mere matter of finding a creative outlet: it was financial necessity. If she did not write and publish, she did not eat»⁸. Maureen Duffy also speculated on Mrs Behn's late coming to fiction - she was 42- and gives the same answer: «She was undoubtedly short of money»⁹; and quotes a letter to her publisher in 1683 talking about her financial problems due to being no longer credited at the theatre.

This theory is not difficult to accept as we are dealing with a person who avowedly wrote to earn her bread. But we must remember that in the last five years of her life, 1684-89, Aphra Behn wrote not only fiction, but also poetry, four plays, and several translations. Besides, more than half of her narratives were published posthumously. So, need of money may easily have been the reason why she decided to try fiction and write the first part of *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684), but what about later? Why present *Oroonoko's* story in a narrative in 1688 if she had been successful again in the theatre with *The Lucky Chance* two years before? And why move again to drama with *The Widow Ranter* (1689), a play with a colonial setting as well? And even, why should we think that the novel, which was not an established literary form at that time, was particularly lucrative in comparison with other genres? It would seem that prose fiction offered Mrs Behn something else apart from money. As has been said before, it was actually another way to present her topics and produce a different effect from the one she had achieved with her plays.

Many critics have pinpointed the fact that Aphra Behn, as a seventeenth-century woman, lacked the education of her «brothers of the pen» and so she could not compete with them on equal terms in genres in which the power of tradition (especially of classical literature) was very strong, as happens to be the case in poetry and tragedy. The new forms of fiction developing in the second half of the century and, in particular, the French *nouvelle* written by women like Mme de la Fayette and Mme de Villedieu, and Mlle de Brillhac, and the anti-romances of Paul Scarron, offered her a new literary form free from any tradition and also open for women to enter significantly both as readers and writers¹⁰. This argument is also acceptable and could be added to the one previously mentioned concerning financial and professional difficulties.

But what was it that this new «genre» offered pragmatically, that is, what did it contribute to the actual composition of a literary work? If we compare it with drama, and in particular, with a heroic tragedy of the Restoration, we find that prose fiction is freer as far as the unities of time and space are concerned¹¹. A narrative can cover a wider time span than a play and has not its spatial limitations either. In this way, prose fiction gains in breadth, admits more elements and therefore enjoys the pleasure of variety, though it loses the density and strength of a compact effect on the public. This is something that Aristotle had already pointed out in his *Poetics* when analysing the differences between epic and tragedy. However, the intensity and thematic quality of the latter gave rise to the common use of an underplot, which was often comic, to soften it. In the case of the late seventeenth-century tragedies, as Southerne explained in his «Epistle Dedicatory» to *The Fatal Marriage*, it was introduced to please «the present Humour of the Town». This appears not to be necessary in a narrative, so that there is nothing to divert the reader's attention from the main concern of the author, even though this might not be presented in such an intense way as in a tragedy. The desired effect is achieved by means of the continuous moderate presentation of a topic, not by the balanced contrast between two extremes.

All this can be noticed when comparing Mrs Behn's *Oroonoko* with Southerne's play of the same name. Her narrative is clearly divided into two parts already announced in the first page:

«The scene of the last part of his (Oroonoko's) adventures lies in a colony in America, called Surinam, in the West Indies.

But before I give you the story of this gallant slave, 'tis fit I tell you the manner of bringing them to these new colonies, (...)»¹².

In this way Mrs Behn starts to describe and comment on the people of Coromantien, the country where Oroonoko was a prince, and also to talk about the hero himself, his love story with Imoinda, and how he was made a slave and taken to Surinam, where the second part of the narrative will take place. One could think that the last section is therefore the most important, but such a conclusion would seem erroneous considering the amount of space devoted to the first part - almost half the narrative - and remembering also that the author thought it «fit» to include it as a background of the second section. Thus, Mrs Behn shows an understanding of the relationship between cause and effect which could be better developed better in a narrative than in a play.

Southerne, however, could portray in his tragedy only Oroonoko's adventures in Surinam, because the conventions of the genre, however loosely applied by many, forced him to condense the plot into a limited period of time, depriving him of the possibility of presenting the hero's story in its historical dimension. Nevertheless, and as I have said before, this allowed him to achieve greater dramatic intensity, which he had to soften somewhat by the inclusion of a comic underplot. The result was very controversial. In the eighteenth century it was thought absurd as well as detrimental to the tragic plot. However, two contemporary critics, Maximilian E. Novak and David S. Rodes, disagree with this judgement in their introduction to a recent edition of the play: «The underplot is certainly a disappointment as a comedy of wit, but what Southerne needed as a contrast to Oroonoko's tragic love and outraged honor was a farce in which love was sex and honor contrivance. And in this strange blend of opposites he succeeded very well»¹³. In fact, this is probably what Southerne intended, as Congreve noticed and defended in his «Epilogue» to the play: «We weep and laugh, join mirth and grief together, Like rain and sunshine mixed, in April weather»¹⁴. Zimbaro disagrees with Novak and Rodes in the need of this farce. For her, the strange blend of opposites is a disaster, not a success¹⁵. Notwithstanding, the comic underplot presents a very interesting topic that Aphra Behn does not deal with in her *Oroonoko*, though it fitted well in her ideas and writings. By this I mean the parallel between slavery and marriage that the Misses Weldon and Widow Lackitt denounce in the play.

Another difference generally to be found between genres such as drama and prose fiction lies in the presentation of the main character(s). In tragedy the focus is on the protagonist and on the development of his fate, that seems to be the effect of a serious flaw in his character or behaviour. If his personality is complex enough, the desired effect of moving the audience to pity may be achieved. The protagonist must die in a painful but noble manner. The heroic plays of the Restoration presented perfect, exemplary characters with a frustrated passion, facing a dilemma between love and honour, or between natural individualism and civilized society. Apart from pity, they evoked admiration.

Those conventions did not apply to prose fiction: the writer is freer to decide the fate of his or her characters. Southerne changed the end of *Oroonoko* slightly, his hero had to die with the dignity befitting a heroic tragedy. Thus, Oroonoko stabs himself, having achieved revenge on the Lieutenant Governor. The fate of the hero in the original story is much

more dreadful. The Royal Slave was executed and dismembered. This was obviously impossible to manage on the stage, but it does represent, on the author's part, a different attitude towards the real culprits of Oroonoko's death: the villainous English settlers on whom all of Mrs Behn's ruthless criticism falls throughout the narrative.

Novak and Rodes find her ending too grotesque and barbaric, and prefer Southerne's Spartan hero: «No indecorous realism destroys the noble impact of Oroonoko's private sufferings»¹⁶. However, Zimbardo disagrees again with them and states that the «private suffering» of a character is inevitably better imitated in the novel because it simulates «real» people and creates the illusion of an internal struggle within them (in the drama there is always an external «show»)¹⁷. For her, Oroonoko suffers realistically and not heroically. Whatever our preference for one version or the other, we must admit that both the authors' aims and the possibilities of the genres were different.

The novel can provide an impression of probability and a more convincing and detailed exploration of the protagonist's thoughts and emotions. Tragedy offers the writer the perfect literary form to present eminent and noble men - and their actions - whose fatal end can prove cathartic for the public, i.e., move them to pity. All the elements of a Restoration heroic tragedy, and mainly its action, characters, and language are geared to impress the audience and elicit their compassion towards the protagonist. For that reason, intensity in the presentation of the story is vital.

The kind of prose fiction in vogue in the last decades of the seventeenth century and used by Aphra Behn - the «nouvelle» and related narrative forms - afforded a wider range of interest and aims. A. J. Tiejé thinks that one of the main objectives of Pre-Richardsonian prose fiction was to gain the reading public's credence, something «so much more than a mere expressed aim that it is perhaps best described as a striving toward a crude form of realism»¹⁸. It had a considerable effect on the content and structure of fiction. Verisimilitude was beginning to be the only limitation for the «nouvelle» writer of the late seventeenth century. Tiejé finds three motives governing this veracity: «the wickedness of lying, the utility of verified narrative, and the pleasure which truth affords a reader»¹⁹.

Critics are still studying the philosophical climate of the seventeenth century looking for the epistemological, ethical and aesthetic changes which

may have heavily influenced the development of prose fiction. McKeon asserts in his *Origins of the English Novel* that «The key to this historical process is the gradual formulation of questions of truth and questions of virtue»²⁰. And for Zimbaro, «The course of development in England between 1660 and 1732 is a transition that runs from imitation of nature as Idea (heroic), through imitation of the interplay between ideational and experimental «reality» (satiric), to imitation of the experiential actual (novelistic)»²¹. It is easy to notice the «naive» empiricism in the presentation of setting and characters in Restoration fiction.

Contrary to the instances commented on so far, in which Southerne was more restricted as to the presentation of Oroonoko's story in tragedy form than Mrs Behn, he was much freer with the facts than she was because he did not have to worry about verisimilitude so much, as this was not required in such a form of drama at that time²². However, Mrs Behn had to employ various devices to prove the truth of her story. She had to claim its historical veracity both at the beginning of the story and in the «Epistle Dedicatory», and to present herself as both an eye-witness to some of the facts and a friend to the protagonist so as to prove that she could have obtained further reliable information from him. Aphra Behn also made sure she included a careful elaboration of the geographical and social background of the events. As Surinam was a romantic and exotic setting for her contemporaries, she wanted to describe minutely many realistic details of the story, exploiting to the full in a cunning way both its exoticism and realism. Detailed description was also used in portraying action, as in the case of Oroonoko's harsh and violent death, for example. Everything was designed with the purpose of making the story seem credible, authoritative and profitable in the moral sense. In this way, the critical content of the narrative becomes more powerful, as she is actually denouncing a real reprehensible situation.

No doubt this question of credibility must be considered crucial to understand Behn's decision not to write a play but a «history». Her purpose was clearly different from Southerne's, and she obviously did not think prose fiction an inferior way of writing in comparison with drama. So, from her point of view, writing a narrative did not mean to «bury» her favourite hero. Rather on the contrary, Oroonoko could never have been taken as real in a tragedy; in a «nouvelle» at least she had a chance. A. Messenger states it clearly: «I think she made that choice because she wanted to be believed»²³, and above all, one would add, because she

wanted to reflect her ethical, social, and political opinions by means of editorial comments apart from sympathising with the protagonist.

As far as imparting information is concerned, there is no doubt that prose fiction is a much more appropriate genre than drama. Thanks to the tradition of other types of prose, there is a wide range of thematic possibilities and, structurally, a narrative also offers full scope for the presentation of ideas. These can be expressed not only by the characters but also by a figure which did not exist in Restoration drama: the narrator. Aphra Behn introduces herself in *Oroonoko*, as in most of her narratives, under the guise of a self-conscious narrator who describes, relates actions, comments on what she shows the reader, or tries to vouch for the truthfulness of everything she says. Jane Spencer considers *Oroonoko* «a novel of ideas as well as action, and the narrator's comments are crucial to the rendering of these»²⁴. As this critic contends, the narrator gets much of her authority from the fact that she is a character in the story who is acquainted with and sympathetic to the hero, as well as being an eye-witness to his last adventures and misfortunes. She is also a person whose nationality, social position and sex give her the chance to comment and criticize freely and significantly²⁵.

By the time of *Oroonoko*'s publication, originality was beginning to be valued - and even demanded - in prose fiction. As its name indicates, a «nouvelle» or «novella» (and hence, «novel» in English) should be something «new», or a piece of news. That is why narratives of this kind should deal with unique, new, personal experiences, or be based on items of news or historical information published in contemporary journals, books, or even registers. An obvious example of this is *Oroonoko*, which is supposed to be the account of the life of a person the narrator met in her stay in Surinam²⁶. However, as no such convention existed in drama, plots could be invented or borrowed from ancient legend, history, fable or other plays, the merit of the new result resting on literary decorum and the quality of the new version. For that reason Southerne could write plays based on Mrs Behn's stories, but not viceversa.

Zimbaro thinks that Southerne's concern for the psychological dimension of human nature led him to the novel and that his debt to Aphra Behn was never fully acknowledged. And comparing both versions of the *Royal Slave*, she claims: «(...) there is no doubt in my mind that Behn's *Oroonoko* is far superior to Southerne's. The novel had been badly

undervalued: in my judgment, among early novels in English it is outranked only by *Robinson Crusoe*, and, even there, the race is close»²⁷. Charles Gildon had already noticed and vindicated the male playwright's debt to the female writer, and the quality of the original version: «(...) it must be confess'd that the Play had not its mighty Success without an innate Excellence, so in my opinion, the necessary regularities a Dramatick Poet is obliged to observe, has left many Beauties in the Novel, which our Author cou'd not transfer to his Poem»²⁸. Conversely, it must be admitted, Southerne's tragedy has «many Beauties» that Mrs Behn's story does not contain.

Whatever the differences between Behn's narrative and Southerne's play, or whatever the possibilities that prose fiction offered to her, it is quite obvious that she profited from her experience as a playwright when she switched to writing narrative. Zimbaro says that «the design of *Oroonoko* is the design of heroic tragedy novelistically rendered»²⁹. And Aercke claims that Behn intended to give readers the impression of being watching a performance on a stage, and she did it mainly by means of her treatment of the background³⁰. As there was no «art of the novel», it was logical to resort to the theories and practices of other genres, and drama seemed the most appropriate, especially for writers who were also playwrights. Maximilian Novak denies any influence of drama techniques on the «novella» of the period; «In fact the influence had been in the opposite direction, romances providing most of the plots for heroic plays, and novellas the plots of Restoration tragedy»³¹. Southerne's *Oroonoko* might be a good case for his thinking thus. Something similar might be said of some of Mrs Behn's plays. The plot of *The Amorous Prince* is taken from Cervantes's story in *Don Quixote* «The Curious Impertinent», and that of *The Dutch Lover* from the romance *The History of Don Fenise*³².

But there are some types of influence other than those visible in plots. In the case of Aphra Behn, there is no doubt that her experience as a playwright was influential in her presentation of background, her handling of dialogue, in her preference for brisk story-telling full of intrigue, coincidence and confusion, and even her occasional use of a dramatic technique - probably a penchant more for showing than for telling.

Choice of genre is largely a question of aims and conventions. Even a comparatively new genre as the «nouvelle» was in the seventeenth

century, in spite of its attractive freedom from technical constraints, was setting up new conventions of its own, like originality and verisimilitude. Its novelty and liberty allowed - demanded even - the influence of other genres, in particular, drama. As Michael McKeon puts it, the novel is «the newcomer that arrives upon a scene already articulated into conventional generic categories and that proceeds to cannibalize and incorporate bits of other forms -(...)- in order to compose its own conventionality»³³.

Comparing Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* with the version that Thomas Southerne did of this story few years later, I think to have proved that Behn's choice of genre was not just due to lack of money or education as many critics have pointed out, but to the joint influence of her own objectives, the prevailing literary conventions, and the epistemological, ethical and aesthetic changes developing at the end of the seventeenth century.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 This refers to *The Fatal Marriage; or, The Innocent Adultery*, 1694, which is based on *The History of a Nun; or, The Fair Vow-Breaker*, 1689.
- 2 Southerne, T. 1977. *Oroonoko; a Tragedy*. London: Arnold, p.4.
- 3 Cfr. Messenger, A. 1986. *His and Hers. Essays in Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Literature*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, pp. 66-7.
- 4 McKeon, M. 1987. *The Origins of the English Novel. 1600-1740*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., p.127.
- 5 Cfr. Zimbardo, R.A. 1986. *A Mirror to Nature: Transformations in Drama and Aesthetics. 1660-1732*. Lexington: U.P. of Kentucky, p.7.
- 6 Cfr. Woodcock, G. 1948. *The Incomparable Aphra*. London: Boardman & Co., pp. 164-5.
- 7 Cfr. Aercke, K.P. 1988. «Theatrical Background in English Novels of the Seventeenth Century», in *Journal of Narrative Technique*. 18, 2, Spring: p.124. Todd, J. 1989. *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing and Fiction. 1660-1800*. London: Virago, p.76. And Salzman, P., ed. 1991. *An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Fiction*. Oxford: O.U.P., p.xxiv.
- 8 Spender, D. 1986. *Mothers of the Novel*. London: Pandora, p.48.
- 9 Duffy, M. 1987. «Introduction» to Aphra Behn. *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*. London: Virago, p. viii.

- 10 This has been noted by several critics like Q.D. Leavis (in *Fiction and the Reading Public*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), Charles C. Mish (in «English Short Fiction in the Seventeenth Century», in *Studies in Short Fiction*. VI, 3, Spring: 1969, pp. 233-330), Paul Salzman (in *English Prose Fiction 1558-1700*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), Maureen Duffy (in *op. cit.*), and Josephine Donovan (in «Women and the Rise of the Novel: A Feminist-Marxist Theory», in *Signs*. 16, 3: 1991, pp. 441-462), for example.
- 11 But there was also a close relationship between the unities and fiction in the late seventeenth century. McKeon (in *op. cit.*, p.126) points out that «the insistence on the preservation of the two unities in Restoration dramatic theory and practice should be seen as a formal analogue of the naive claim to historicity in Restoration narrative». And according to Aercke (in *op. cit.*, p.120), a good example of the influence of the poetics of drama on fictional prose was the introduction of unities in the novel in order to promote verisimilitude. This was already noticed by J. Warshaw in «The Epic-Drama Conception of the Novel» (in *Modern Language Notes*. 35: 1920, p.276). He claimed that, apart from enforcing probability and reasonableness, the unities prevented digressions and minimized unnecessary complications. And Congreve openly declared in his preface to «Incognita» that he wanted to imitate dramatic writing, and for that reason he tried to maintain the unities in his narrative (Cfr. P.Salzman, ed., *op. cit.*,1991, pp. 474-5).
- 12 Aphra Behn, «Oroonoko; or, the History of the Royal Slave», in *Oroonoko and Other Stories*. London: Methuen, 1986, p.27.
- 13 Novak, M.E. & Rodes, D.S. 1977. «Introduction» to Southerne, T. *op. cit.*, p. xxviii.
- 14 Southerne, T. *op. cit.*, p. 125.
- 15 Cfr. Zimbardo, R.A. 1986. *op. cit.*, p.199.
- 16 Novak, M.E. & Rodes, D.S. 1977. *op. cit.*, p. xl.
- 17 Zimbardo, R.A. 1989.»The Late Seventeenth-Century Dilemma in Discourse. Dryden's *Don Sebastian* and Behn's *Oroonoko*», in J.D. Canfield & J.P. Hunter, ed. *Rhetorics of Order/Ordering Rhetorics in English Neoclassical Literature*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, p. 60.
- 18 Tiejé, A.J. 1913. «A Peculiar Phase of the Theory of Realism in Pre-Richardsonian Fiction», in *PMLA*. XXVIII, p.213. He believes that the other objectives are: 1) entertain the readers, 2) edify them, 3) impart information to them, 4) depict life for them, and 5) arouse their emotions.
- 19 Tiejé, A.J. *op. cit.*, p. 215.
- 20 McKeon, M. *op. cit.*, p.265.
- 21 Zimbardo, R.A. 1989. *op. cit.*, p.48.
- 22 In spite of the efforts for verisimilitude in Restoration drama, heroic tragedy

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