Notes on *Oroonoko*

*Oroonoko* reflects movements that are emerging and new:
- The origins and emergence of the novel (*novel* means new)
  - *Oroonoko* is 30 years prior to Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*.
  - A realistic story (not a poem) developing out of an interest in travel narratives (tales of those who have been to sea)
  - It echoes works such as *Utopia* and *The Tempest* and precedes works such as *Gulliver’s Travels*, but what makes *Oroonoko* novel is its realism.
- The emergence of women writers.
- The growth of the British empire (colonies, trade, slave trade).
- A growing fascination with non-European “others.”

Aphra Behn, like Dryden, was a royalist, a supporter of King James II, who many resented because he threatened to bring in a Catholic dynasty. James II was deposed in 1688 by his own daughter (Mary, who was Protestant) and son-in-law (a Dutchman, William of Orange). James II went into exile in France (see NA 2058-59). This event in 1688—the coming of power of William and Mary, who ruled as joint sovereigns—is known as the Glorious or Bloodless Revolution (though it depends on point of view—at least no one’s head was cut off).

Oh how fall’n! They had it all, and what became of them?
- King Lear
- Charles I
- James II
- Satan
- Adam & Eve
  - *Oroonoko*, or The Royal Slave

**Synopsis of *Oroonoko* on our class website:**

*Oroonoko* is the story of an African prince who deeply loves the beautiful Imoinda. Unfortunately, his grandfather, the king, wants Imoinda also. Imoinda is eventually sold as a slave and is taken to Suriname which is under British rule. Oroonoko's tribe is a supplier for the slave trade. One day an English ship arrives and the captain invites prince Oroonoko to come aboard for a meal and drinks. After dinner, the captain takes advantage of Oroonoko's trust and takes Oroonoko and his men prisoners. The ship then sets sail. When they arrive at their destination, Prince Oroonoko is sold to a British gentleman named Trefry who likes and admires the prince. As is the practice with all slaves, Oroonoko is renamed. His slave name is Caesar. Oroonoko soon finds out that Imoinda is a slave on the same plantation, but her slave name is now Clemene. They get back together and soon Imoinda finds out that she is pregnant. Oroonoko tries to free his family because he does not want his children born into slavery. His request is denied. He next leads a slave revolt but he is betrayed and is badly beaten when he is caught. Finally, he decides that he would rather see his family die quickly from his own hand than die the slow death of slavery so he kills Clemene and the unborn child. He is about to kill himself but decides to first have his revenge on those who would not give him his freedom. Eventually he is caught and suffers a cruel and inhuman death.

*(Source: Western Michigan U.)*

**SEE KEY SECTIONS OF ORONOOKO ON NEXT PAGE ...**
KEY SECTIONS OF ORONOOKO: (The Royal Slave Bears the Marks of Nobility. “You can take the Prince out of Power, but you can’t take the Power from the Prince.”)

- 2183: Royal, gallant
- 2186-7: Court, education
- 2189: Courtly love
- 2199: Noble warrior
- 2204-05: Noble marks, “Caesar”
- 2206: Clemene/Imoinda as “Daphne” (fearing rape from Apollo)
- 2213: The eel/serpent
- 2217: Treated like dogs--no!
- 2223: Noble resolution
- 2224-45: Noble death
• 2183-85: describes the South American natives, not the slaves
  o They are described like “Adam and Eve . . . . before the Fall”
• 2186-87: narrator’s description of Oroonoko’s noble qualities; the narrator met O and is recounting his tale.
• 2188-95: both Oroonoko and his grandfather, the king, have affection for Imoinda (the royal veil = 2189; king’s jealousy 2195)
• 2196-97: O and I’s secret lovers’ meeting; she had avoided the grandfather up to this point, and now she would be untouchable to the king. To protect her life (and with O safely departed), she claims rape. 2198: A King’s messenger lies, telling O that Imoinda was killed.
• 2198-99: O is with his troops at camp, engaged in a military campaign, about to go into battle, but he’s depressed; however, when his low spirits threaten his army, he rallies and appears “like some divine power” gaining conquest.
• 2200-01: O is tricked by a ship’s captain he does business with, and he is himself enslaved. He’s taken from Africa to Guiana, and he is sold to Trefry (2204), who renames O Caesar (2205).
• 2206: Trefry tells O about a Clemene, “a fine she-slave,” who people speak of in Petrarchan terms—she is “all ice,” and is described like Apollo’s evasive Daphne.
• 2207: Trefry takes O to see Clemene, and O discovers it’s Imoinda!
• 2208: Caesar takes Clemene for his wife and is even more eager for their liberty.
• 2209: Caesar’s spirit knows no bounds—he’s too lazy to rest; he “suffered only the name of a slave” and spent his time in warlike actions, hunting animals, “killing tigers of monstrous size” and “snakes, such as Alexander is reported to have encountered”
• 2213: Perhaps the scene of being overtaken by the electric eel is symbolic; it almost echoes being seduced by a snake. It implies something out of joint in the “chain of being.” Heunderestimates the eel. Caesar bears marks of nobility but is perhaps too trusting within an environment that threatens him.
• 2216: Imoinda pregnant. Slavery now weighs more heavily…
• 2217: Caesar’s rousing rebellion speech (echoing Satan in PL) –men, not animals (not an ass, dog, or horse…not “sold like apes or monkeys, to be the sport of women, fools, and cowards, and the support of rogues, runagades, etc.”
• 2218: The plan to run away…and they are caught trying (2219)
• 2219: Caesar and Imoinda resist and fight, facing off against deputy governor Byam.
• 2220: With Imoinda at risk and being surrounded, “Caesar was overcome by his wit and reason” and gave into the Byam’s “fair-tongued” (2218) promises; a pardon was written, but as soon as Caesar was brought back he was brutally whipped and tortured.
• 2221: Caesar runs off to the woods.
• 2223: Caesar determines to seek revenge, even if it means death; however, he imagines the cruelty Imoinda may undergo with him gone, and so he plans to kill her, his enemies, and himself. He tells her his plan and is “pleased at her noble resolution.” He kills her, and remains beside her dead body in the woods for days.
• 2224: “you will find no more Caesars to be whipped, no more find a faith in me.” Caesar cuts himself to pieces (2225) in an unflinching demonstration of his resolve. He is taken prisoner
again, and they continue to cut him to pieces while he stands resolute “as if nothing had touched him” (2226)