Prospectus: Aphra Behn And The Purpose Of Oroonoko

In my final essay, I plan to examine Behn's novel Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave and pose the question "What message was Behn trying to convey in writing Oroonoko's story?" Readers of Behn's prose narrative Oroonoko may come to the conclusion that it was only written as a way of showcasing racial inequality and the consequences of imperialism. However, I believe the intentions Behn had in writing Oroonoko extend beyond the portrayal of racial inequality and furthermore comments on the social and political turmoil in England, as well as abroad, and discusses corrupt relationship between sovereignty and the market place (Gallagher 54).

In Oroonoko, the narrator's reaction to journey of the downfall of the noble savage Oroonoko, reflects Behn's own views concerning the political and economic state of England, selective sympathy, and the role of authority.

I have chosen five sources to defend my point of view. My first source, Nobody's story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace 1670-1820, a book about late seventeenth and eighteenth century female writers, will provide insight into Behn's perspective of the political and economic state of England during Charles II reign (53). This source will also explore the relationship between sovereignty and the marketplace (Gallagher 54) in both England and Surinam. This, combined with Behn's perspective of the state of England will allow for a deeper understanding on Behn's thoughts regarding the relationship between sovereignty and the marketplace (Gallagher 54). My second source "Spectacle, Spectatorship, and Sympathy in Aphra Behn's Oroonoko" by Ramesh Mallipeddi establishes connections between slave suffering and sympathy in order to appeal to the intended English audience' (492). Utopian Geographies and The Early English Novel by Jason H. Pearl

Will explore the purpose of the novels idea of utopia in Surinam juxtaposed against specifically English society, which is contaminated by the constraints of the patriarchy and aristocratic ideals (61).

Cynthia Richards' article "Interrogating Oroonoko: Torture in a New World and a New Fiction of Power" focuses on the role of the narrator, and questions the legitimacy behind her words. I will use this article to connect Behn's stance on positions of authority in power, such as her patrons, and the accuracy of their words. Finally, my last source Sim Stuart. "Oroonoko, or, The History of The Royal Slave and Race Relations" will analyze the selective sympathetic nature of the narrator and the impact that nature has regarding the central message Behn attempted to explain through Oroonoko (17).

Structurally, I will begin by introducing the political and economic state of England during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well as explain Behn's political, social, and economic standing during this time. I will support this view through the understandings of the economic situation for female writers found in Gallagher's novel Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace. I will then, using the sources mentioned prior, examine the various interpretations of Aphra Behn's Oroonoko and discuss the importance and likelihood of each author's position. Finally, using all the information, I will determine which positions contribute to the central purpose of Behn's novel Oroonoko.

Bibliography

Gallagher, Catherine. “The Author-Monarch and the Royal Slave Oroonoko and the Blackness of Representation.” Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace 1670-1820. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.

Gallagher’s novel illustrates the tumultuous political and economic state of England during the exclusion crisis of Charles II reign (53). This novel focuses on the struggles female writers in the late dealt with in the marketplace as a result of the crisis, such as debt and a shift of support from the audience to patronage of aristocrats (54). The author goes on to connect Behn, as the author, with a sold king in Oroonoko with the common idea that their tragedy is ironically also their commodities (Gallagher 55). Gallagher also provides insight on Behn’s intended audience, describing the average demographic of Behn’s theatre audience, which who Behn was speaking to in the novel (12). Gallagher’s exposition on the parallels between Behn and Oroonoko provides insight into Behn’s reason for the publication of Oroonoko.

Mallipeddi, Ramesh. “Spectacle, Spectatorship, and Sympathy in Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko.” Eighteenth-Century Studies, vol. 45, no.4, 2012, pp. 475-496.

Mallipeddi’s article aims to explore the “theoretical implications of the novella’s Emphasis on spectacle” (476) of Oroonoko. Mallipedi argues Behn’s use of hyperbolic descriptors of Oroonoko’s tragedy allows the audience to attach different meanings to the African body (491). That were not thought of before in European society.The text connects Oroonoko’s graphic dismemberment with the political economy by relating each race and gender Mallipeddi however, does point out Behn’s indifference towards the treatment of the majority of the ordinary slaves as opposed to one that is considered exceptional (491), potentially creating a lack of sympathy for the masses (491). The author emphasizes the importance of the shifting views on the African body, through going through the stages of Oroonoko’s life beginning with the fetishizing of his body and ending with the disgust and sympathy upon his death (492).

Pearl, Jason H. “Remembering Paradise in Oroonoko.” Utopian Geographies & the Early English Novel. Charlottesville, Virginia ; London : University of Virginia Press, 2014.

Pearl’s novel illustrates the meaning of both inner and outer utopia. The importance of the unknown world as a form of utopia (65).

Richards, Cynthia. “Interrogating Oroonoko: Torture in a New World and a New Fiction of Power.” Eighteenth-Century Fiction, vol. 25, no. 4, 2013, pp. 647–676.

This article specifically examines the execution scene of Oroonoko, in which Richards argues that the importance of this scene is not only to invoke sympathy, but also to paint an image of vicious brutality, while hinting at the narrator’s absence from the scene (649). Richard’s claims

that the intent of the narrator's absence, despite her vivid imagery of the murder, is done purposefully by Behn in order to highlight the fact that violence may be skewed to fit the narration the author chooses for their own individual interests (647). Richards has a firm standpoint in that reason for the hyperbolic and explicit violence occurring is a way of the narrator legitimizing the false fact that she was present during Oroonoko's murder.

Sim, Stuart. "Oroonoko, or, The History of The Royal Slave and Race Relations." The Eighteenth-Century Novel and Contemporary Social Issues an Introduction. Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

Sim's article criticizes Behn, or at least the narrator's, perspective of slavery. Despite Behn's praise of Oroonoko and her sorrow at his death, the narrator is indifferent to the majority of the slaves (Sim 17). The narrator's residency in the colony of Surinam and her general attitudes towards Oroonoko, a slave trader, and his accomplishments in battle demonstrates the narrator's acknowledgement of the benefits to colonialism and slavery. Sim points out the selective nature of sympathy when regarding the slaves, rather than a general sympathetic position.

Works Cited

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2. Literature. Greenblatt, Stephen, gen. ed. The Norton Anthology of English Literature. 10th ed. Vol. C. New York: Norton, 2018, pp. 139-186.
3. Gallagher, Catherine. "The Author-Monarch and the Royal Slave Oroonoko and the Blackness of Representation." Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace 1670-1820. U Of California P.
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