What Kind of Story Is This?

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Consider the four kinds of kind in these passages from Oroonoko:

A Poet is a Painter in his way; he draws to the Life, but in another kind; we draw the Nobler part, the Soul and Mind; the Pictures of the Pen shall out-last those of the Pencil, and even Worlds themselves. (5)

Though, as Oroonoko afterwards said, he had little Reason to credit the Words of a Backearary, yet he knew not why; but he saw a kind of Sincerity, and awful Truth in the face of Trefry. . . . (35)

Trefry was infinitely pleas'd with this Novel, and found this Clemene was the Fair Mistress of whom Caesar had before spoke; and was not a little satisfied, that Heaven was so kind to the Prince, as to sweeten his Misfortunes by so lucky an Accident. . . . (40)

The Trees appearing all like Nosegays adorn'd with Flowers of different kinds; some are all White, some Purple, some Scarlet, some Blue, some Yellow; bearing, at the same time, Ripe Fruit and Blooming Young, or producing every Day new. (43)

In the last two decades, Behn’s novel has been elevated from the status of literary enigma and designated a canonical origin of the genre. Many editions and full-scale critical attention have transformed informational deficit into scholarly surfeit. Students approaching Oroonoko for the first time can be encouraged to find tools for their exploration in the first few pages of the text, cues for them
to recognize the interpretive scaffolding as well as the contextual frameworks that they will confront in the classroom and in the accompanying critical readings. The most general question to begin with might therefore be: what kind of story is this?

In this essay, I use that question to frame three crucial pedagogical goals for the teaching of *Oroonoko*. First, I alert students to register the complexity of genres, whether this work is taught in a history-of-the-novel context, in an early-women-writers setting, in a special topics slavery-and-abolition seminar, or in a standard survey course. Students learn quickly when they realize that genre questions are paramount for understanding truth claims made both in a text and about a text. Second, focusing on sophisticated decision making about the kind of story *Oroonoko* is (or whether it is indeed just one story) helps the novice evaluate as well as pigeonhole competing claims made about the text, even as it provides the conceptual hooks on which to hang the bewildering number of critical essays and contextual notes that supplement the text’s many available editions. Third, I turn this pedagogical plan away from a classificatory exercise to one that has students ask whether a disruptive story about kind and kindred, as well as about kindness and unkindness, can be classified at all. What kind of story—and what kind of interpretation—will allow the emergence of other questions about kin, kindred, and kindness, and about genre, gender, and genus?

**Kinds of Story**

The autobiographical aspects of *Oroonoko* are both compelling and ambiguous. First-person narration is combined with avowals of honesty and protestations against artifice. The first four words of the story are “I do not pretend . . .” (8). Students might be asked to make a list of the many kinds of story implied in the first few pages—what genre theorists term the “rules of recognition” that tell readers which reading protocols to use. A discussion exercise could involve asking each student to state possible genre categories that various moments in *Oroonoko* exemplify, and then to sketch attributes of that genre. The instructor could improvisationally expand on these attributes and tie them back to the opening pages. If students are reticent, the instructor might do a show-and-tell based on the list below. The goal of this discussion is to acknowledge the usefulness of labeling even while recognizing that classificatory exercises stabilize meanings of texts by creating expectations early in the reading process. The interaction of genre, theme, and trope will help the instructor work the classroom. Is a genre formed around a storytelling technique? Is the story the kind that features a certain theme? a certain trope? a particular treatment? In the following list of genres and subgenres, the point is not to suggest that all genres are equally useful for analyzing a text but to make students aware that genre diversity expands a text’s interpretive horizon:
autobiography: “I do not pretend...” (8)
travel narrative: “Those on that Continent where I was,” or Behn’s trip to Surinam (10)
tall tale: Is her novel historically accurate or the “Adventures of a feign’d Hero” (8)?
mirabilia: “various Excellencies, such as Art cannot imitate,” wonders (9)
biography: “the Story of this Gallant Slave” (8)
testimony: “I was my self an Eye-Witness to a great part” (8)
slave narrative: story received from “the Mouth of the chief Actor in this History” (8)

history: “the History of this Royal Slave” (8)
hagiography: “the Character of this great Man” (8)
colonial propaganda: “the manner of bringing [Slaves] to these new Coloni- nes” (8)

ethnography: description of the natives of Surinam (8–11)

early novel: “True History” on the title page (3)

primitivist myth, noble savage subgenre: the theme of native naïveté (8–11)

epic: the Homeric parallels to Oroonoko’s heroic exploits throughout the novel

classical romance: comparison of Oroonoko and Imoinda with Mars and Venus (14)

transcontinental tale: featuring Europe, Africa, Asia—the triangular trade may come up anachronistically but can be anticipated

oriental tale: will be recognized as characteristic of the Coramantien section

tragedy: will come up in relation to Oroonoko’s hubris and cruel death

medieval courtship tale: Coramantien episodes featuring Oroonoko and Imoinda

civil war narrative: “frightful Spectacles of a mang’ld King” at the end of the story (65)

Kinds of Interpretation

For the next exercise, during another class session, the instructor orchestrates a discussion of how powerful interpretations of the text take generic cues to conclusions that totalize. By going through some of the historical background and criticism in any scholarly edition used, the instructor can demonstrate how certain themes, tropes, and even entire approaches connect with rules of recognition. Asking what kind of story Oroonoko is leads logically to the question of which interpretation one might be looking for. Intention and reception dialectically structure the text; both sides of the picture are needed. What was Behn thinking? What forms influenced her? Why did she write the story as she did? These
questions matter as much as the reasons why we take up this story today, in the context of the historical aftermath of transatlantic slavery and of race relations in the New World; they matter as much as the modern awareness of economics, gender, and sexuality that we bring to Behn’s work. The novel’s “Female Pen” (36) raises feminist questions about gendered authority and agency in the literary sphere, even while the Middle Passage is rendered as historical fact and reimagined fiction. To read historically and to read anachronistically are not opposing but dialectical moves: readers confront preexisting facts and interpretations that they then contest and decenter but also reappropriate. Meaning is made through a readerly negotiation of textual givens.

Attending to the tragic, allegorical, biographical, and historical elements in the story that connect with Behn’s life can lead to an interpretation of Oroonoko as a coded lament over the execution of Charles I, as Laura Brown suggests. Yet picking up on the gendered silences and historical contexts of slavery, plantation culture, and marronage can lead to a powerful reading of the narrative as encoding resistance against a slave economy through self-inflicted violence and suicide, as Charlotte Sussman argues. Robert Chibka discusses the dizzying nature of the contradictory truth claims and silences that can prompt speculation about the early novel, the epistemological nature of truth and falsity, and the way that fiction arises precisely in the zone of uncertainty generated between these two poles. Slavery, orientalism, civil war, colonialism, and intergenerational and intercultural love triangles are important themes. Students should also be made aware of the intersectionality of frames and the way the many interpretations of Oroonoko are a direct consequence of framing devices in the text, while the articulation of new contexts creates a discursive spiraling of themes to address new situations.

Stories about Kind(ness)

It is a commonplace that the institution of slavery denies the humanity of the slave. But Oroonoko is a good text to teach students that they need to denaturalize their expectations concerning the human, a construct that is profoundly cultural, philosophical, and historical and therefore subject to considerable variation. Oroonoko was written at a moment when new discourses on species were being initiated in Europe, in the context of the colonial encounter in the Americas as well as of the development of oceanic trade routes around the world. The species discourse in Behn’s text ranges from curiosity about and interest in exotic birds and insects, electric eels and man-eating tigers, to concerns about human groups and cultural systems as defined through processes such as ornamentation and mutilation. It is fascinating that Oroonoko provides at least two contested definitions of humanity. Is truth telling (or keeping one’s word) a definition of humanity? If so, almost no one is genuinely human. Oroonoko is full of episodes of betrayal: the English governor does not keep his promise to
return to visit the indigenes in Surinam; the ship's captain does not keep his repeated promises to Oroonoko, when he kidnaps him, makes him eat and drink, and sells him down the river. These betrayals are repeated in Oroonoko's friendship with Trefry and with the unnamed female narrator. We need to problematize any equation of the author with the narrator and of the 1688 narrator with her recollected self of 1663. Oroonoko is a text that benefits from careful separation of the story world from the discourse world, of diegesis from nondiegesis. Oroonoko's promises to the slaves he leads into rebellion are as rhetorical and vacuous as those made by any demagogue. Perhaps lying is a better definition of humanness, as some evolutionary anthropologists now argue. In any case, the text has its readers confront human beings as creatures who make promises to one another and betray one another—and the circumstances and consequences of both promise and betrayal are revealed in the narrative only through the passage of time. Although some promises are made in good faith but cannot be kept later, in Behn's work the focus is on the promise made in bad faith, where betrayal becomes not so much tragic as cynical and the innocence and gullibility of some are paired with the cunning and wickedness of others. But Oroonoko does not take place in a completely cynical universe, which would lead to detachment and misanthropy; there is occasional generosity and compassion, mixed with apology and excuses.

The question of the status of his progeny begins to obsess Oroonoko when Imoinda is pregnant with "his" child, and he becomes intractable (in the terminology of slavery), rebelling against his role as pet of the narrator and her company (Aravamudan). He is an honorary king and superior to most Africans and Europeans in his circle, but his child may not have the freedoms that were temporarily withdrawn from him and yet are not completely out of reach. A further complication is the ambiguous character of Imoinda, whom Oroonoko reclaims as his sexual property and who welcomes the suicide pact with him when she is pregnant. Is the baby definitely Oroonoko's? Paternity is always a matter of opinion, especially under the sexual brutality of slavery (Spillers). Let's not forget too quickly Trefry's sexual interest in Imoinda before Oroonoko reclaims her. Because Oroonoko himself bought and sold slaves, he knows that the freedom of human beings is uncertain and Imoinda's child may be enslaved at birth. He cannot accept that possibility.

The notion of kindred obtains across gender and genus. What kind of child will Oroonoko and Imoinda parent? What will the status of that child be in a culture where there are at least three kinds of quasi-racialized people (Europeans, Africans, Amerindians) who intersect yet share no common definition of humanity? This metaphysical and anthropological uncertainty points to rebellion. Some English colonists conflate Oroonoko and his kindred with all those of his color; others want to treat him differently but according to his rank. The kindred question is a classificatory exercise, to choose an ethnocultural and indeed biological order. The text offers three genealogies: first, of the English Civil War; second, of the Coramantien monarchy; and third, of the Amerindian
indigene. The reproduction of a slave (Imoinda's pregnancy) interrupts the cultural encounter among the three groups in a manner that causes violence. The question of biological kind appears to challenge all generic classifications. In this regard, Oroonoko connects Renaissance discovery, travel, and colonial endeavor. Our transnational and global age is posing the question of species classification anew, with the challenges posed by transgenic technologies.

The meaning of biological kindred is framed through a discourse of kindness. This meaning will be denied yet reaffirmed through its denial—denied through the colonists' refusal to liberate Oroonoko or to fulfill the various broken promises made to him yet reaffirmed through the martyrdom that turns him into a kind of secular saint even though he must die to achieve this elevation. Christian notions of kindness as well as an anachronistic sense of Enlightenment abolitionism frequently associated with this text are the results of a double operation: kindness denied through action and kindness reaffirmed through recollection. The animal instincts of reproduction create monsters out of the classificatory system that sees Oroonoko as an animal story rather than a human story. Behn's work is about pets, the infrahuman, the partially human, and the not yet recognized as human (Aravamudan). The animal-oriented narrative involves a sliding scale from exotic birds and beasts to creatures who speak and fight and perform incredible exploits and expect truthfulness. The Christlike martyrdom becomes a beast fable, parable, or allegory. Oroonoko is totemic, infrahuman, and superhuman at once. He "gave up the Ghost, without a Groan, or a Reproach," making him a "Great Man," and a "Glorious Name," even though cut "in Quarters" to become the "frightful Spectacles of a mang'l'd King" (64–65).

Do our students—do we—really want to admit what kind of story Oroonoko is? It tells of creatures who refuse to allow other creatures to recognize their kindred, who see—and yet do not see—others as the same and of their own kind. It tells of pretending to be kind while being cruel. It tells how to make stories out of other people's deaths, about condoning the killing of others while spinning a tale, and it anticipates our repetition of that literary spinning as readers, unless we can resist the generic mechanisms that lead to the closure of the form and the closing of the pages of the physical book. Oroonoko is a story about the narrator's implicit jealousy of Imoinda, about the narrator's participation in the colonial project of diverting the protagonist from rebellion, and about her disappearance downriver at the moment when Oroonoko needs her most. Therefore it is an indirect autobiographical confession of complicity, taking the form of an obituary of a great man more than two decades after his death. It is exculpatory and self-incriminating at the same time. Where does that leave the readers: are they guilty or judgmental? entertained or sorry? outraged or seeking justice? in the narration or beyond it? This readerly complicity in an authorial crime is what makes Oroonoko truly disturbing. As the narrator says in Toni Morrison's Beloved, "This is not a story to pass on" (275). Given that stories such as Oroonoko and Beloved are indeed passed on despite narratorial qualms, what kind of cultural transmission do they enact and reenact? Communicating this
paradox will ensure that the story survives even as the reader becomes its critic or dupe. *Oroonoko* reveals how much reading is an ethical act, and that ethics, to be responsive, has to interrogate thoroughly any unexamined assumptions about humankind.

In these comments I have not focused exclusively on instructional techniques but have also given teachers a general sense of the principles we need to keep in mind when teaching *Oroonoko*. Many of the essays in this volume connect principles with techniques in innovative ways, but at the beginning I wanted to suggest that *Oroonoko* is about reading, reflecting, and enacting a form of readerly self-awareness that is fundamental to experiencing the literary text as a rhetorical and aesthetic practice. Contexts are important, and information is crucial, but they can all become lifeless documentation if, as teachers of *Oroonoko* or of any literary text, we do not consider carefully how reading tracks from intention to reception to appropriation to re-creation.

Students need to recognize that there is something fruitful as well as abstruse about *Oroonoko* as a literary work, that its literariness is a separate matter from all the noble attempts that enshrine it as a historical document. There is a happy interdisciplinary critical consensus about the topics of race, gender, and sexuality, but there are many knowledge projects in a pluridisciplinary university. If historians read texts as documents, literary critics read them as rhetorical artifacts. Outcomes of disciplinary reading therefore vary considerably and will not always agree.

*Oroonoko* can survive, indeed thrive, under the weight of the referential critical apparatus that uses it to document slavery, the Middle Passage, and colonialism. But it will fare better if we unfold our pedagogy around the word that I treat as a pressure point in this exposition: *kind*. Of the four citations of kind from *Oroonoko* that I offered at the start of this essay, the first involves aesthetic genre (poetry vs. painting), the second features a variety of emotion (sincerity), the third references divine compassion, and the fourth classifies flowers. Kinds of representational media and kinds of sentiment are ultimately forced to yield pride of place to the genre or genus of stories about kind that challenge pre-established notions of who or what a human being might be.

The production of the text is linked to the failed reproduction of the slave who desires unenslaved status for his kindred; in fact, its success is a direct outcome of that failure. *Oroonoko* is the kind of story about humankind that should give us, and our students, pause.

NOTE

1 Brown's, Sussman's, and Chibka's essays are excerpted, respectively, in Behn, *Oroonoko* [Lipking] 232–45, 246–56, 220–32.