Teaching *Oroonoko* with Milton and Dryden; 
or, Behn’s Use of the Heroic

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*The Female Quixote*, published in 1752, centers on a debate over the durability of heroic values: “‘But Custom,’ said Arabella, ‘cannot possibly change the Nature of Virtue or Vice: And since Virtue is the chief Characteristik of a Hero, a Hero in the last Age will be a Hero in this’” (Lennox 328). Defending the heroes that she alone admires, Arabella refers to the gap between late-seventeenth-century French romances and the middle eighteenth-century world she inhabits. The heroic romances that were immensely popular during Behn’s lifetime fell out of favor by the middle of the following century, roughly about the same time that Behn’s novels stopped being regularly reprinted. Arabella’s optimism in the transcendent value of heroic virtue ultimately gives way to her rational acceptance of custom and Christian duty. The novel appears to reject the stoic self-sacrifice, bravado, and reckless violence of heroes motivated by extremes of love, honor, and glory—heroes who have a great deal in common with Behn’s *Oroonoko*. The debate that Lennox’s novel engages, therefore, has immediacy for those of us who teach Behn’s story. First of all, it suggests the need to historicize the heroic character because it is tied to the mores of an age, and these are deeply connected to changing structures of gender, race, religion, and politics. Second, it asks us to consider the reader’s position: How can we expect modern readers to appreciate the heroic nature of Behn’s text if readers less than one hundred years later rejected it?

While much scholarship approaches *Oroonoko* as the start of a literary tradition, this essay demonstrates the importance of returning it to the contentious and idiosyncratic years of its production. The heroism with which Behn endues her character was the common stock of the Restoration. British admiration for the heroic, of course, drew from classical precedents, and Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus provided the critical terms on which the heroic genres were constructed. The unique conditions in Behn’s England, however, added piquancy and personal investment to the meaning of heroic codes. A country divided in civil war, committed to a trial commonwealth, and then, in 1660, returned to a fragile monarchy knew about reversals of fortune and the price of martial valor. By 1688, when Behn put her narrative into print, England was on the eve of yet another political revolution, one that in the end was bloodless. Behn’s writing, like much of her contemporaries’, participated in explicit political endorsement (Zook; Kroll). Like the poet laureate, John Dryden, Behn supported the Stuart monarchy and the emerging Tory party. Her version of heroism celebrated Cavalier, inborn nobility consistent with kingship. Opposing voices, such as the republican John Milton, appealed to divine models for their versions of heroism, and *Paradise Lost*, originally published in 1667, was arguably the most
important heroic poem in English. Both sides of the political spectrum claimed the heroic, as it was debated and revised by various participants.

The cultural conditions of the Restoration thus produced a flowering of generic experimentation in heroic modes. Heroic verse included the highly esteemed epic and tragedy, as well as panegyric and even satire; on stage, the heroic drama became something of a Restoration vogue. In prose, translations of French romances as well as homegrown heroic tales created a palate for extremes of love and honor, and the rising form of biography, such as was written by Lucy Hutchinson and Margaret Cavendish for their husbands, also qualified as heroic renderings (Staves 32–42). There are many possible reasons for this enthusiasm, from an ideological support for the restored monarchy to the influence of French tastes in the Stuart court to the psychological need of a populace wounded by civil war. This heroic outpouring gradually dried up after 1700, but it is important to see Oroonoko in the heady mix (Richardson).

Historicizing heroism, however, will not necessarily allow students comfortable access to Behn's hero. From beginning to end, Behn characterizes Oroonoko as exemplary, and the narrator indicates that she writes the novel for the sake of preserving her hero's memory. This consistency suggests a confidence in the heroic character that conveys in sentiment if not specifics. Students tend to agree that Oroonoko is heroic, but they respond in varying and confusing ways if asked why. Looking more closely at Behn's depiction of the heroic does not yield easy answers. As we historicize heroism and place Behn in conversation with other writers of her era, we confront the fact that the Restoration had many passionate and contradictory investments in the heroic. Drawing out the historical, literary, and cultural threads, one discovers that Behn's novel is a deeply ambivalent portrayal of masculine heroism. Yet, given the modern relevance of key factors in this depiction — religion, violence, gender, and race — an instructor could benefit from analyzing where the tensions lie and why.

The language of the heroic mode, which can be exaggerated and artificial, presents a fundamental challenge in reading Oroonoko. Behn adopts conventions of heroic romance and drama when Oroonoko speaks in phrases like, "Whoever ye are that have the Boldness to attempt to approach this Apartment thus rudely, know, that I, the Prince Oroonoko, will revenge it with the certain Death of him that first enters" (25). Restoration readers knew that this elevated diction signaled nobility of character while the message conveyed the fortitude requisite of heroes.

That being said, seventeenth-century authors held varying opinions on the right way to represent a hero, and representation was tied to a brand of heroic virtue. Milton, for example, offers in Paradise Lost a Christian heroism in contrast to classical: "argument / Not less but more Heroic than the wrath / Of stern Achilles" (9.13–15). He specifies new virtues

Not sedulous by Nature to indite
Wars, hitherto the only Argument
Paradise Lost recognizes and parodies the conventions of the classical heroic in the figure of Satan while presenting an alternative hero, or set of heroes, in the figures of the Son of God, Adam, and perhaps Eve. The virtues of “Patience and Heroic Martyrdom” suggest a Christian alternative to warlike violence and an analogue for Puritans who died for their beliefs. As a further manifestation of religious and political difference, Milton, in a note on his verse, defends his use of blank verse as a true measure of “English Heroic Verse” in contradistinction to the rhyming lines of royalist heroic dramas—“the Invention of a barbarous Age, to set off wretched matter and lame Meter” (Introduction 210). Mercy, for Milton, is clothed in pure language.

Despite the political revolutions that changed his fate, Dryden had a lifelong commitment to classical heroic genres. In his preface to Anns Mirabilis (1667), he explains that “the most heroick Subject which any Poet could desire” is “a most just and necessary War” (1: 50). In the dedication to Mulgrave of his translation of Vergil’s Aeneid (1697), he writes, “A heroick Poem, truly such, is undoubtedly the greatest Work which the Soul of Man is capable to perform. The Design of it, is to form the Mind to Heroick Virtue by Example.” He follows Aristotle in demanding that the action be “always one, entire, and great.” All elements must be “Grave, Majestical, and Sublime” (5: 267). With classical precedents to support them, these standards were widely accepted, and the heroic prose genres that developed in Behn’s lifetime adopted the warlike subjects and sublime style, though they did not follow the unity of action.

Whereas classical heroism focused on war, seventeenth-century heroic genres appeared exceptionally concerned with conflicts of romantic love. This concern was especially true of the French romance and heroic drama and, unsurprisingly, Oroonoko. Dryden wrote in defense of his Conquest of Granada, “[A]n Heroick Play ought to be an imitation, in little of an Heroick Poem: and, consequently, that Love and Valour ought to be the Subject of it” (11: 10). Like Behn, he drew on the French romances that would become outdated a century later. But if he puts the heroic romance of La Calprenède and Scudéry in company with Homer and Tasso as models for his hero, he claims to be “more in love with Achilles and Rinaldo, than with Cyrus and Oroondates” (11: 16). Here and elsewhere Dryden offers a homosocial heroic love to offset the potentially feminizing effect of female relationships. In An Essay of Dramatick Poesie, he writes, “Homer describ’d his Heroes men of great appetites, lovers of beef broild upon the coals, and good fellows; contrary to the practice of the French Romances, whose Heroes neither eat, nor drink, nor sleep, for love” (17: 32). Behn’s hero appears to have more in common with those across the channel.
Although his prowess on the battlefield earns Oroonoko initial honors, Behn suggests that the genuine source of his heroism lies in his character: “that real Greatness of Soul, those refin’d Notions of true Honour, that absolute Generosity, and that Softness that was capable of the highest Passions of Love and Gallantry” (12). More so than for Dryden or Milton, her hero’s virtue is tied to his capacity for passionate, romantic love for a woman. In response to news of Imoinda’s death, Oroonoko vows that “henceforth he wou’ d never lift a Weapon, or draw a Bow; but abandon the small Remains of his Life to Sighs and Tears” (28), and he lies prostrate for two days refusing food and water. More important, Oroonoko is completely incapacitated by Imoinda’s actual death, a point to which I will return.

Another controversy in heroic discourse centers on the morality of the hero. For ancient epics and French romances, vengeance and pride serve as laudatory motivations for heroic action, but Puritans identified vengeance and pride as principal human vices. Milton suggests an alternative model of heroism by opposing the classical heroics of Satan with the perfect moral nature of the Son of God (Steadman 254–55, 288). Dryden, in contrast, celebrates the exceptionality of traditional heroism: “[Poets] made their Hero’s men of honour; but so, as not to divest them quite of humane passions, and frailties. They contented themselves to show you, what men of great spirits would certainly do, when they were provok’d, not what they were oblig’d to do by the strict rules of moral vertue” (11: 16). Violence, revenge, and fortitude, particularly fortitude in physical suffering, are hallmarks of the classical hero. Behn appears to side with Dryden, and she grants an exceptional morality to Oroonoko. His ability to kill is demonstrated throughout the novel. Certainly one of the text’s greatest pedagogical difficulties lies in understanding his killing of Imoinda, but there are other questionable actions, such as selling Africans into slavery and later calling them, “Dogs, treacherous and cowardly, fit for such Masters” (56). Having the status as a hero may exempt Oroonoko from “the strict rules of moral vertue,” but discussing this historical relativism in the classroom is likely to raise the point that heroic virtue has changed. Its change offers an opportunity to discuss current mores as tied to issues of violence, gender, religion, and race.

Much can be gained by focusing on the hero if one teaches Oroonoko after Milton’s Paradise Lost and Dryden’s Absalom and Achitophel. Although Macflecknoe is taught more frequently than Absalom and Achitophel, the latter offers more direct parallels both to Paradise Lost (Paulson 49) and to Oroonoko. The biblical parody and heroic couplets of Absalom and Achitophel make it accessible after a brief review of the politics of the Exclusion Crisis, and Dryden’s work prepares students to see the less explicit political tensions in Behn’s text (Kroll; Guffey). Rich comparisons can be drawn in terms of heroic style and allusion, the hero’s moral character, the politics of his leadership, and more. Mindful of space, this essay takes up one particularly productive thread—the failed rebellion. Because of salient parallels, I highlight Milton’s Satan as a heroic figure. As early as Dryden, readers recognized Satan as a hero. Dryden
judged Milton's epic according to the classical standards he admired, failing to see the ways in which *Paradise Lost* would reshape the discourse surrounding heroic poetry. Yet Satan did not work as a hero for Dryden in part because he was defeated. His revenge on God the Father is undone by the self-sacrifice of the Son of God. Adam and Eve, though fallen from grace, have the promise of future salvation. Succeeding centuries have fully vetted the question of Satan's heroic status, and the important passages that yield diametrically opposed readings (Steadman; Carey). Like Oroonoko, Satan leads an insurrection that fails; like Oroonoko, he vows revenge, which also fails. Some critics, like Merritt Hughes, argue that Satan begins as a heroic character in the first two books of *Paradise Lost* and is degraded in his final scene in book 9. Others, notably Stanley Fish, maintain that Satan remains the same character throughout the poem; what changes is the reader's ability to perceive his flaws. Fish's insight that the text reads the reader is helpful here: if the Satan image forces the reader to question what heroic virtue is, then the poem engages students in an analysis they can carry over to the other works. Putting *Paradise Lost* into its Restoration context, some readers will find that it sets a Christian heroism of patience and martyrdom higher than classical bravery, vengeance, and war. Others may argue for the exceptional morality of Satan and see him justified in defiance of the Father's tyranny. As students note the similarities between Oroonoko and Milton's Satan, they can begin to question what revenge might mean in terms of heroic virtue.

Dryden's *Absalom* also centers on a failed rebellion in a poem with numerous and complicated connections to *Paradise Lost*. Dryden identifies one Miltonic echo, drawing a parallel in his dedication between Absalom, standing in for Monmouth, the king's illegitimate son, and Adam:

*But, since the most excellent Natures are always the most easy; and, as being such, are the soonest perverted by ill Counsels, especially when baited with Fame and Glory; 'tis no more a wonder that he withstood not the temptations of Achitophel, than it was for Adam, not to have resisted the two Devils; the Serpent, and the Woman.* (2: 4 ["To the Reader"])  

While the passage mitigates Monmouth's crime by disingenuously aligning Monmouth with Adam, it subtly redirects blame toward a woman. The poem realizes this misogynistic theme by the conspicuous absence of romantic values and female worth, an absence that contrasts sharply with the other examples. Instead the poem works out a series of paternal relationships and conflicting constructions of masculine virtue. Dryden represents Absalom as a rebel son, although he clearly makes him a pawn to Achitophel's Satan-like scheming. Yet the thirst for fame and glory animates the soul of Absalom and sets him on the path of doomed insurrection: "Desire of Greatness is a Godlike Sin" (2: 16 [line 372]). In contrast, Dryden characterizes David's (Charles II's) mildness as both a virtue and a weakness, associating the king with the mercy and patience
of Milton’s Son of God. The poem presents David’s dignified authority at the end as a counter to the infection-like power of the mob supporting Absalom (28–29 [lines 753–810]). As the narrative moves from mistaken hero to certain hero—as in Paradise Lost—Dryden layers the heroic characterization in contrasting masculine values. He pits the “Manly Force” (16 [line 382]) of Absalom against the waning tolerance of David: “Beware the Fury of a Patient Man” (35 [line 1005]). Although Dryden leaves the ending uncertain, the insurrection is characterized as a failure, and David appears in godlike omnipotence in the closing lines. Dryden designs failure for Satan-like Absalom, but the complexity of the Miltonic parallels and gendered constructions leaves open the question of what heroic behavior is, particularly as fitting a man. For students today, the political agency of the rabble may in fact have heroic appeal, but the poem clearly favors tyranny when exercised by a mild patriarch. Dryden’s political satire puts a great deal of stock in David’s correct performance of masculine authority, impugning the rebellious son.

Students come to see that Oroonoko resembles both Satan and Absalom in his noble character and desire for sovereignty. Since Oroonoko is a prince tricked into slavery, however, the conditions of his subjection differ from those of the archangel and the bastard son. This comparison of fallen heroes thus offers an opportunity for students to discuss how conditions of race and the role of the African prince affect the representation of honor, bravery, and morality. For example, Oroonoko’s speech to the male slaves provides an important contrast with the concluding arguments in book 2 of Paradise Lost and with Achitophel’s seduction of Absalom. Each work presents a different rationale for rebellion that reflects the character’s heroic standing. In the wake of defeat, Oroonoko, like Satan, vows himself to vengeance: “I won’t not kill my self, even after a Whipping, but will be content to live with that Infamy... till I have compleated my Revenge; and then you shall see that Oroonoko scorns to live with the Indignity that was put on Caesar” (58). Ultimately, though, he fails to revenge his honor and restore his good name, and the key to this defeat is not the treachery of Byam or the institution of slavery but rather the effeminizing effects of love. The heroic code offers a justification for Oroonoko’s decision to kill Imoinda; Oroonoko must seek revenge for his honor, and the expected consequence of that revenge is Imoinda’s vulnerability to violence at the hands of the colonists. Yet Imoinda’s valor and self-sacrifice in the death scene provide the opportunity for students to discuss how gender inflects the novel’s codes of honor. Imoinda’s self-sacrifice, as well as her service in the revolt, raises the possibility for a female heroism, which is distinct from Oroonoko’s (Rose 85–112; Ortiz).

Having dispatched his beloved, Oroonoko is overcome by grief: “[H]e Tore, he Rav’d, he Roar’d, like some Monster of the Wood, calling on the lov’d Name of Imoinda” (61). He collapses and for eight days is unable to lift himself from the ground. This scene plays out the heroic conflict between love and honor, and love—translated into grief—triumphs. The immoral but heroic act of
killing Imoinda is thus wasted in pathos, and this waste prefigures the literal 
emasculature of the hero several pages later. Behn, by having her hero defeated 
by the consequences of his own violent action, offers a serious challenge to the 
masculine heroic code.

But Behn gives Oroonoko the last word on honor in a religious critique that 
resonates back to Milton. Throughout the text, she puts Oroonoko in situations 
where his innate honesty is betrayed by the hypocrisy of Christian men, a failing 
that Tory writers associated with Puritan cant. After Byam tells him he will “Dye 
like a Dog,” Oroonoko responds “that he was the only Man, of all the Whites, 
that ever he heard speak Truth” (64). While Paradise Lost suggests a Puritan 
deal of martyrdom as an alternative to the classical heroic model, Behn’s 
classical-romance hero is martyred speaking a biting indictment of Christian 
values.

Teaching Oroonoko in context with Paradise Lost and Absalom and Achito
tophel historicizes and complicates the idea of the heroic and thereby allows 
students better access to the complexity of Behn’s character. None of these 
texts offers a simple model of heroism. Milton rejects the classical heroic model 
embodied in Satan but nonetheless offers a compelling portrait of its virtues; 
Dryden employs heroic parallels and gendered constructions to raise and ul-
timately discredit the rebel Whig, Monmouth; Behn borrows heavily from he-
roic genres to memorialize Oroonoko but in the end leaves the heroic code 
factured. The comparison invites students to question whether the virtues of 
heroism translate into our age and to what extent custom has altered the con-
struction of heroic masculinity. In what ways is violence, or mercy, or patience 
important to systems of religion and honor, then or now? How do constructions 
of race or gender factor in moral questions? Is the hero by definition exempt 
from the mores of other human beings? Instead of seeing Oroonoko’s language 
and behavior as antiquated, this focus engages these questions as vital to every 
student.