

Approaches to Teaching Behn's Oroonoko. Edited by Cynthia Richards and Mary Ann O'Donnell. Approaches to Teaching World Literature. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2014. Pp. 227. ISBN: 9781603291286 (paperback).

Norton came out with the first affordable teaching edition of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* in 1973. Now, just over 40 years later, their *Approaches to Teaching Oroonoko* is a welcome addition to MLA's practical series *Approaches to Teaching World Literature*. Anyone who has taught *Oroonoko* realizes that it is as challenging as it is fun to teach, mostly because one must inevitably *choose* a single or a few of the unusually various and complex ways to teach the novel. Richard and O'Donnell's volume lays out a smorgasbord of approaches that will inspire both new and veteran teachers of the book. While race, class, and gender have dominated student discussions on this work for several generations, *Approaches* covers these familiar bases while branching out to newer themes. To make this diversity possible, the editors used the results of a survey of nearly fifty instructors from around the world, in addition to the almost thirty contributors to the book itself. Because of the large number of essays, all high quality, I will unfortunately only be able to highlight a few.

The book is organized into two parts. After an engaging preface, part 1: "Materials," by Mary Ann O'Donnell, offers a concise reference guide to editions, concordances, and secondary sources. Its brief introductions to the most prominent criticism related to discussions of race and slavery, historical approaches, comparative approaches, and Surinam are very useful for teachers trying to get their bearings quickly. Part 1 also includes information about maps and illustrations, additional online resources, and a thorough chronology extending from 1562–1999. This first section is definitely where to start if you are new to teaching *Oroonoko*.

Part 2, "Approaches," is broken down into several sections, comprising twenty-seven essays total. The first section, formal and thematic contexts, focuses on questions of genre and narrative. I found Keith M. Botelho's piece on "Credibility and Truth in *Oroonoko*" to be particularly insightful for rejuvenating my own large survey course lecture on the novel, which is very much inspired by Robert L. Chibka's 1988 article, "'Oh! Do Not Fear a Woman's Invention': Truth, Falsehood, and Fiction in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*." For that kind of pedagogical approach, Botelho's ideas about how to discuss truth and genre would link well with the penultimate piece in the section, Bill Overton's "The Language of *Oroonoko*," where he suggests concrete ways of discussing with

students the use of direct and indirect speech and what that signifies in terms of narrative theory.

In the second section on cultural contexts, many important topics are covered: blackness, economics, the traffic of women, transatlanticism, revolution, war, and the Caribbean. Karen Gevirtz presents a convincing way of teaching the novel through the issue of money and commodity: “Oroonoko asks—but does not always answer—serious questions about the relationship between money and morality, yet Behn’s struggle with these questions can be made to ring true to students born over three hundred years after her death” (70). In her essay “The Traffic of Women: *Oroonoko* in an Atlantic Framework,” Laura M. Stevens builds on this real-world angle with her focus on “*traffic* in both the early modern and contemporary senses of the word, as commence and as the movement of people” (72). Considering the continuing, or perhaps increasing, trade in trafficked people around the world, these are difficult but very necessary conversations to be having in our classrooms as we teach our students about their present by means of the past.

Pedagogical contexts, the third section, offers timely and practical views on how to teach *Oroonoko* in a range of courses (from survey to seminar) and institutions (teaching colleges, historically black universities, etc.). For me the highlight of this section, maybe of the whole book, was Erik Bond’s essay, “Teaching the Teachers: *Oroonoko* as a Lesson in Critical Self-Consciousness.” Bond speaks from his experience in the metropolitan Detroit area teaching very diverse students who wish to pursue a career as teachers in primary or secondary education. He advocates embracing the messiness of the novel in order to use *Oroonoko* to teach the act of interpretation itself and awaken in students a self-consciousness of that act, transferable to any piece of literature or cultural product. To do this, he persistently points out the interpretive blind spots of any one approach to the novel; thus, the students learn that by teaching only one single interpretation, “how easy it is to perpetuate privileged strategies” (133). Such a lesson connects back to the questions of genre, truth, and credibility that the first section of this volume examines, especially Botelho’s essay. As Bond sums up, “Behn’s self-conscious narration invites [the students] to embrace the pluralistic nature of literary interpretation and to experience the political consequences that can result from teaching only one interpretation of the text” (135). This essay really captures the great teaching potential latent in the rich complexity of *Oroonoko*.

The fourth section, comparative contexts, covers a broad spectrum of ways to teach *Oroonoko* alongside other texts, including the poems of Milton and

Dryden, early modern drama, later theatrical adaptations of the novel, and the writing of *Equiano*. These essays are especially helpful at drawing out questions of genre and how to teach genre theory at the upper undergraduate and graduate levels. Authorial contexts, the fifth and final section of approaches, concludes with another one of the most interesting of the essays: Jane Spencer's "Behn and the Canon." Spencer probes what *Oroonoko's* place in the canon means for our evolving understanding of authorship and authority, today and in the seventeenth century. It is fitting to end this strong volume with the remarkable fact that literary pedagogy has come full circle to recuperating Behn to the prestige she once desired:

She no doubt would have been startled, but I am sure she would have been pleased to know that 320 years after her death at least one university (Waterloo, Ontario) would be inviting students to encounter writers such as Dryden, Etherege, Rochester, and Wycherley by enrolling in a course entitled *The Age of Aphra Behn: Restoration Literature* (199).

In sum, Cynthia Richards and Mary Ann O'Donnell have done an excellent job gathering such a broad range of views on teaching *Oroonoko*, and I highly recommend this volume for anyone considering teaching the novel, whether for the first time or the twentieth.

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