

OROONOKO,  
OR,  
THE ROYAL SLAVE



*Oroonoko*

*or,*

*The Royal Slave*

APHRA BEHN



RENARD PRESS

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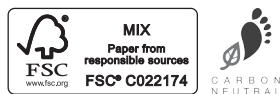
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TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE THE  
LORD MAITLAND\*

MY LORD,

SINCE THE WORLD is grown so nice and critical upon dedications, and will needs be judging the book by the wit of the patron, we ought, with a great deal of circumspection, to choose a person against whom there can be no exception, and whose wit and worth truly merits all that one is capable of saying upon that occasion.

The most part of dedications are charged with flattery; and if the world knows a man has some vices, they will not allow one to speak of his virtues. This, my lord, is for want of thinking rightly. If men would consider with reason, they would have another sort of opinion, and esteem of dedications, and would believe almost every great man has enough to make him worthy of all that can be said of him there. My lord, a picture-drawer, when he intends to make a good picture, essays the face many ways, and in many lights, before he begins, that he may choose from the several turns of it which is most agreeable and gives it the

best grace; and if there be a scar, an ungrateful mole, or any little defect, they leave it out, and yet make the picture extremely like; but he who has the good fortune to draw a face that is exactly charming in all its parts and features – what colours or agreements can be added to make it finer? All that he can give is but its due; and glories in a piece whose original alone gives it its perfection. An ill hand may diminish, but a good hand cannot augment its beauty. 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 outlast those of the pencil, and even worlds themselves. 'Tis a short chronicle of those lives that possibly would be forgotten by other historians, or lie neglected there, however deserving an immortal fame, for men of eminent parts are as exemplary as even monarchs themselves; and virtue is a noble lesson to be learned, and 'tis by comparison we can judge and choose. 'Tis by such illustrious precedents as your lordship the world can be bettered and refined, when a great part of the lazy nobility shall, with shame, behold the admirable accomplishments of a man so great, and so young.

Your lordship has read innumerable volumes of men, and books – not vainly for the gust of novelty, but knowledge, excellent knowledge. Like the industrious bee, from every flower you return laden with the precious dew, which you are sure to turn to the public good. You hoard no one perfection, but lay it all out in the glorious service of your religion and country, to both which you are a useful and necessary honour – they both want such supporters, and 'tis only men of so elevated parts and fine knowledge, such



noble principles of loyalty and religion this nation sighs for. Where shall we find a man so young, like St Augustine,\* in the midst of all his youth and gaiety, teaching the world divine precepts, true notions of faith and excellent morality, and, at the same time, be also a perfect pattern of all that accomplish a great man? You have, my lord, all that refined wit that charms and the affability that obliges, a generosity that gives a lustre to your nobility, that hospitality and greatness of mind that engages the world and that admirable conduct that so well instructs it. Our nation ought to regret and bemoan their misfortunes for not being able to claim the honour of the birth of a man who is so fit to serve his Majesty and his kingdoms in all great and public affairs, and to the glory of your nation be it spoken, it produces more considerable men for all fine sense, wit, wisdom, breeding and generosity (for the generality of the nobility) than all other nations can boast; and the fruitfulness of your virtues sufficiently make amends for the barrenness of your soil, which, however, cannot be incommode\* to your lordship, since your quality, and the veneration that the commonalty naturally pay their lords, creates a flowing plenty there – that makes you happy. And to complete your happiness, my lord, Heaven has blessed you with a lady, to whom it has given all the graces, beauties and virtues of her sex, all the youth, sweetness of nature of a most illustrious family, and who is a most rare example to all wives of quality\* for her eminent piety, easiness and condescension, and as absolutely merits respect from all the world as she does that passion and resignation she receives from your lordship, and which is, on her part,

with so much tenderness returned. Methinks your tranquil lives are an image of the new-made and beautiful pair in paradise, and 'tis the prayers and wishes of all who have the honour to know you that it may eternally so continue, with additions of all the blessings this world can give you.

My lord, the obligations I have to some of the great men of your nation, particularly to your lordship, gives me an ambition of making my acknowledgments by all the opportunities I can; and such humble fruits as my industry produces I lay at your lordship's feet. This is a true story of a man gallant enough to merit your protection; and, had he always been so fortunate, he had not made so inglorious an end. The royal slave I had the honour to know in my travels to the other world; and though I had none above me in that country, yet I wanted power to preserve this great man. If there be anything that seems romantic, I beseech your lordship to consider, these countries do, in all things, so far differ from ours that they produce unconceivable wonders – at least, they appear so to us, because they are new and strange. What I have mentioned I have taken care should be truth, let the critical reader judge as he pleases. 'Twill be no commendation to the book to assure your lordship I wrote it in a few hours, though it may serve to excuse some of its faults of connection, for I never rested my pen a moment for thought. 'Tis purely the merit of my slave that must render it worthy of the honour it begs, and the author of that of subscribing herself, my lord,

Your lordship's most obliged and obedient servant,

APHRA BEHN

OROONOKO,  
OR,  
THE ROYAL SLAVE

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*Note from the Publisher:* The reader is warned that this text contains graphic, unsettling scenes and descriptions that are far from what is considered acceptable or tasteful by modern standards. A discussion of some of the themes can be found in the Extra Material on p. 121.



**I** DO NOT PRETEND, in giving you the history of this royal slave, to entertain my reader with the adventures of a feigned hero, whose life and fortunes fancy may manage at the poet's pleasure; nor, in relating the truth, design to adorn it with any accidents but such as arrived in earnest to him, and it shall come simply into the world, recommended by its own proper merits and natural intrigues, there being enough of reality to support it and to render it diverting without the addition of invention.

I was myself an eyewitness\* to a great part of what you will find here set down, and what I could not be witness of I received from the mouth of the chief actor in this history – the hero himself – who gave us the whole transactions of his youth; and though I shall omit, for brevity's sake, a thousand little accidents of his life, which, however pleasant to us, where history was scarce and adventures very rare, yet might prove tedious and heavy to my reader, in a world where he finds diversions for every minute, new and strange; but we who were perfectly charmed with the

character of this great man were curious to gather every circumstance of his life.

The scene of the last part of his adventures lies in a colony in America called Surinam, in the West Indies.\*

But before I give you the story of this gallant slave, 'tis fit I tell you the manner of bringing them to these new colonies, for those they make use of there are not natives of the place – for those we live with in perfect amity, without daring to command 'em, but, on the contrary, caress 'em with all the brotherly and friendly affection in the world, trading with 'em for their fish, venison, buffalo skins and little rarities, as marmosets – a sort of monkey as big as a rat or weasel, but of a marvellous and delicate shape, and has face and hands like a human creature – and couseries\* – a little beast in the form and fashion of a lion, as big as a kitten, but so exactly made in all parts like that noble beast that it is it in miniature. Then for little parakeets, great parrots, macaws and a thousand other birds and beasts of wonderful and surprising forms, shapes and colours. For skins of prodigious snakes, of which there are some threescore yards in length, as is the skin of one that may be seen at his Majesty's antiquaries,\* where are also some rare flies of amazing forms and colours, presented to him by myself, some as big as my fist, some less, and all of various excellencies, such as art cannot imitate. Then we trade for feathers, which they order into all shapes, make themselves little short habits of 'em, and glorious wreaths for their heads, necks, arms and legs, whose tinctures are unconceivable. I had a set of these presented to me, and I gave 'em to the King's theatre,\* and it was the dress of

the Indian Queen infinitely admired by persons of quality,\* and was inimitable. Besides these, a thousand little knacks,\* and rarities in nature, and some of art, as their baskets, weapons, aprons, etc. We dealt with 'em with beads of all colours, knives, axes, pins and needles, which they used only as tools to drill holes with in their ears, noses and lips, where they hang a great many little things – as long beads, bits of tin, brass or silver, beat thin – and any shining trinket. The beads they weave into aprons about a quarter of an ell\* long, and of the same breadth, working them very prettily in flowers of several colours of beads – which apron they wear just before 'em, as Adam and Eve did the fig leaves, the men wearing a long stripe of linen, which they deal with us for. They thread these beads also on long cotton threads, and make girdles to tie their aprons to, which come twenty times or more about the waist, and then cross, like a shoulder belt, both ways, and round their necks, arms and legs. This adornment, with their long black hair, and the face painted in little specks or flowers here and there, makes 'em a wonderful figure to behold. Some of the beauties, which, indeed, are finely shaped, as almost all are, and who have pretty features, are very charming and novel, for they have all that is called beauty, except the colour, which is a reddish yellow, or, after a new oiling, which they often use to themselves, they are of the colour of a new brick, but smooth, soft and sleek. They are extreme modest and bashful, very shy, and nice of being touched. And though they are all thus naked, if one lives for ever among 'em, there is not to be seen an indecent action or glance; and, being continually

used to see one another so unadorned, so like our first parents before the Fall, it seems as if they had no wishes, there being nothing to heighten curiosity – but all you can see you see at once, and every moment see – and where there is no novelty, there can be no curiosity. Not but I have seen a handsome young Indian dying for love of a very beautiful young Indian maid; but all his courtship was to fold his arms, pursue her with his eyes, and sighs were all his language; while she, as if no such lover were present, or rather, as if she desired none such, carefully guarded her eyes from beholding him, and never approached him, but she looked down with all the blushing modesty I have seen in the most severe and cautious of our world. And these people represented to me an absolute idea of the first state of innocence, before man knew how to sin. And 'tis most evident and plain that simple nature is the most harmless, inoffensive and virtuous mistress. 'Tis she alone, if she were permitted, that better instructs the world, than all the inventions of man. Religion would here but destroy that tranquillity they possess by ignorance; and laws would but teach 'em to know offence, of which now they have no notion. They once made mourning and fasting for the death of the English Governor, who had given his hand to come on such a day to 'em, and neither came, nor sent, believing, when once a man's word was passed,\* nothing but death could or should prevent his keeping it; and when they saw he was not dead, they asked him what name they had for a man who promised a thing he did not do. The Governor told them such a man was a liar, which was a word of infamy to a gentleman. Then one



of 'em replied, 'Governor, you are a liar, and guilty of that infamy.' They have a native justice, which knows no fraud, and they understand no vice or cunning, but when they are taught by the white men. They have plurality of wives, which, when they grow old, they serve those that succeed 'em, who are young, but with a servitude easy and respected; and, unless they take slaves in war, they have no other attendants.

Those on that continent where I was had no king, but the oldest war captain was obeyed with great resignation.

A war captain is a man who has led them on to battle with conduct and success, of whom I shall have occasion to speak more hereafter, and of some other of their customs and manners, as they fall in my way.

With these people, as I said, we live in perfect tranquillity, and good understanding, as it behoves us to do, they knowing all the places where to seek the best food of the country, and the means of getting it, and, for very small and unvaluable trifles, supply us with what 'tis impossible for us to get, for they do not only in the woods and over the savannahs, in hunting, supply the parts of hounds, by swiftly scouring through those almost impassable places, and, by the mere activity of their feet, run down the nimblest deer and other eatable beasts, but in the water, one would think they were gods of the rivers, or fellow citizens of the deep, so rare an art they have in swimming, diving and almost living in water, by which they command the less swift inhabitants of the floods. And then for shooting; what they cannot take or reach with their hands, they do with arrows, and have so admirable an aim that they

will split almost a hair; and at any distance that an arrow can reach, they will shoot down oranges and other fruit, and only touch the stalk with the dart's point, that they may not hurt the fruit. So that, they being, on all occasions, very useful to us, we find it absolutely necessary to caress 'em as friends, and not to treat 'em as slaves; nor dare we do other, their numbers so far surpassing ours in that continent.

Those, then, whom we make use of to work in our plantations of sugar are Negroes, black slaves altogether, which are transported thither in this manner.

Those who want slaves make a bargain with a master, or captain of a ship, and contract to pay him so much apiece, a matter of twenty pound a head for as many as he agrees for, and to pay for 'em when they shall be delivered on such a plantation, so that, when there arrives a ship laden with slaves, they who have so contracted go aboard and receive their number by lot; and perhaps in one lot that may be for ten, there may happen to be three or four men – the rest, women and children. Or, be there more or less of either sex, you are obliged to be contented with your lot.

Coramantien,\* a country of blacks so called, was one of those places in which they found the most advantageous trading for these slaves, and thither most of our great traders in that merchandise trafficked, for that nation is very warlike and brave, and, having a continual campaign, being always in hostility with one neighbouring prince or other, they had the fortune to take a great many captives, for all they took in battle were sold as slaves – at

least, those common men who could not ransom themselves. Of these slaves so taken, the General only has all the profit, and of these generals our captains and masters of ships buy all their freights.

The King of Coramantien was himself a man of a hundred and odd years old, and had no son, though he had many beautiful black wives, for most certainly there are beauties that can charm of that colour. In his younger years he had had many gallant men to his sons, thirteen of which died in battle, conquering when they fell, and he had only left him for his successor one grandchild, son to one of these dead victors, who, as soon as he could bear a bow in his hand and a quiver at his back, was sent into the field to be trained up by one of the oldest generals to war; where, from his natural inclination to arms and the occasions given him with the good conduct of the old general, he became at the age of seventeen one of the most expert captains and bravest soldiers that ever saw the field of Mars:\* so that he was adored as the wonder of all that world, and the darling of the soldiers. Besides, he was adorned with a native beauty so transcending all those of his gloomy race that he struck an awe and reverence even in those that knew not his quality – as he did in me, who beheld him with surprise and wonder when afterwards he arrived in our world.

He had scarce arrived at his seventeenth year when, fighting by his side, the General was killed with an arrow in his eye, which the Prince Oroonoko (for so was this gallant Moor\* called) very narrowly avoided – nor had he, if the General, who saw the arrow shot and, perceiving it

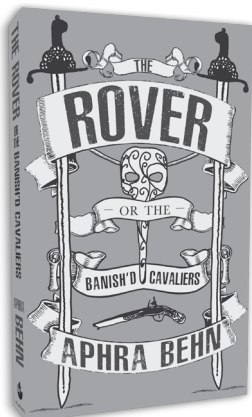
aimed at the Prince, had not bowed his head between on purpose to receive it in his own body rather than it should touch that of the Prince, and so saved him.

'Twas then, afflicted as Oroonoko was, that he was proclaimed General in the old man's place; and then it was, at the finishing of that war, which had continued for two years, that the Prince came to Court, where he had hardly been a month together, from the time of his fifth year, to that of seventeen; and 'twas amazing to imagine where it was he learned so much humanity – or, to give his accomplishments a juster name, where 'twas he got that real greatness of soul, those refined notions of true honour, that absolute generosity and that softness that was capable of the highest passions of love and gallantry, whose objects were almost continually fighting men, or those mangled or dead, who heard no sounds but those of war and groans. Some part of it we may attribute to the care of a Frenchman of wit and learning, who, finding it turn to very good account to be a sort of royal tutor to this young black, and perceiving him very ready, apt and quick of apprehension, took a great pleasure to teach him morals, language and science, and was for it extremely beloved and valued by him. Another reason was he loved, when he came from war, to see all the English gentlemen that traded thither, and did not only learn their language, but that of the Spaniards also, with whom he traded afterwards for slaves.

I have often seen and conversed with this great man, and been a witness to many of his mighty actions, and do assure my reader the most illustrious Courts could not



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'All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, which is, most scandalously but rather appropriately, in Westminster Abbey, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.'

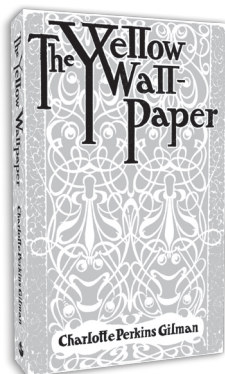
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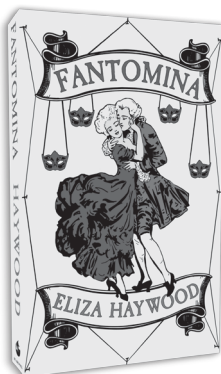
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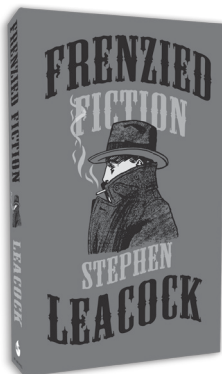
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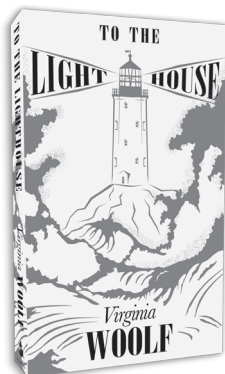
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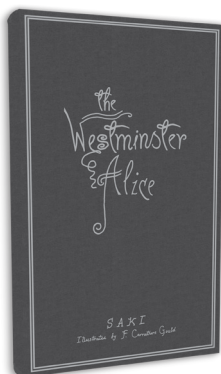
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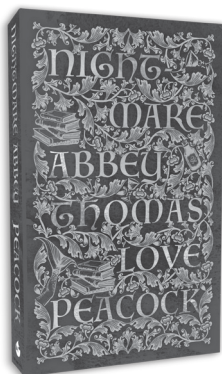
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