

# **Oroonoko: An Authoritative Text, Historical Backgrounds, Criticism Study Guide**

**Oroonoko: An Authoritative Text, Historical  
Backgrounds, Criticism by Aphra Behn**

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## Plot Summary

The play, "Oroonoko" is designed with two running plots that have very little connection. The first story introduced to the audience is that of the Welldon sisters, Charlotte and Lucy, who leave their home of London, England, and move to Surinam, West Indies, in search of husbands. Their husband-hunting has run dry in London and they move to the the English colony of Surinam for a fresh start. Since apparently women cannot purchase land in Surinam in 1695, Charlotte disguises herself as a man. This ruse leads to other dimensions, however, when a rich, old widow becomes smitten with Charlotte, who she thinks is a man. Having designs on the old woman's fortune, Charlotte plays along to a degree. When they "marry" Charlotte recruits a local, Jack Stanmore who has designs on the widow, to sneak in at night and have sex with the woman.

The major plot, and the more serious of the two, involves the tragedy of Oroonoko, an Angolan prince, who is betrayed and tricked into becoming a slave. Prior to becoming a slave, Oroonoko's father, the Angolan King, had already made Oroonoko's life unbearable. The King was so taken with Oroonoko's beautiful and alluring wife, Imoinda, that he could not bear to see her with anyone else. The King exiles Imoinda to Surinam as a slave. Due to her physical appeal, she is forced to become the mistress of Surinam's Governor.

Ironically, one of Oroonoko's responsibilities in Angola is to gather countrymen to sell for slaves. He often deals with the slave trader, Captain Driver. The Captain invites Oroonoko on the slave ship on the premise of touring the facilities on board the ship. The Captain gets Oroonoko drunk. Oroonoko passes out and when he comes to he is in chains and shackles and on his way to Surinam and sold as a slave.

The upside of this change of fortunes for Oroonoko is that he is reunited with Imoinda. They are ecstatic to find one another again even under such terrible circumstances. She is carrying his child and they contemplate a future together as a family. The slaves are planning a revolt against their owners in a fight for freedom. Oroonoko is convinced to join the movement and become its leader. When one of the slaves betrays Oroonoko and reveals their plans to the governor, their plans are sabotaged. The governor promises Oroonoko his freedom if he yields. However, the governor betrays Oroonoko who is seized when he surrenders his sword. The Governor who desires Imoinda forces her away from Oroonoko.

With Blanford's help, Imoinda is able to escape from the Governor. She finds Oroonoko who is standing by the dead body of his servant, Aboan, who committed suicide rather than return to life as a slave. Oroonoko and Imoinda come to the realization that the only way they can ever be together is to die. Imoinda commits suicide just before the Governor and his men find them. Oroonoko whispers to his dead wife that he will soon be with her. Oroonoko kills the Governor and then himself. The play ends with Blanford, Oroonoko's loyal friend, saying a prayer for the slave prince.



# Act 1

## Act 1 Summary

### Scene 1

Charlotte Welldon is disguised as a man so that she can make proper claim to property in Surinam, West Indies. In the company of others, Charlotte goes by the name, "Welldon." Lucy is complaining about Charlotte, her sister, persuading her to leave England just to look for a husband. Charlotte assures her that it will be easy to find a husband in America. Charlotte reminds Lucy that neither had any suitors in London so they were not leaving any opportunities behind. While Lucy claims the young men have forgotten them, Charlotte contends there were never any men interested in them. Lucy responds that they could be had for a scandalous price. Nonetheless, Charlotte reminds Lucy, they will still tire of the women and replace them with new faces. It is not fair - says Lucy - men get to be young as long as they live. Women are considered in decay at 21 or 22 years of age!

Charlotte feels positive about their move to Surinam. Charlotte (disguised as a man named Welldon) had passed for Lucy's cousin and has claimed kinship to the estate of a man who just died. They therefore have a nice place to live, will be in the right circles and be regarded with respect. The sisters are visited by the Widow Lackitt. She explains that she has been ill and apologizes for not welcoming them sooner. Widow Lackitt not so subtly hints that she expects a kiss hello from the young man, Welldon. Welldon kisses the widow who then complains that he kisses like a younger brother - like he expects to be paid for it. Welldon admits that (s)he is like a younger brother.

Welldon explains that a grand uncle left him the estate. The widow replies that her husband left his estate to her. He is in Heaven and much better off. Welldon counters that surely the widow is looking for a new husband but the widow protests. However, she will not rule out the possibility since she cannot foretell who she may meet. In fact, she could be tempted by a much younger man. The widow wants to talk business, so Welldon excuses Lucy. To herself, Charlotte/Welldon wonders what awkward situation she may be bringing on herself with the widow.

Widow Lackitt is very wealthy and owns several plantations. Since she heard that Welldon wants to purchase a plantation she can assure him of a good deal on one of her properties. Welldon responds that he would be honored to live among the people in Surinam. The widow tells Welldon she likes his last name. She could fantasize about being called Mrs. Welldon but she could not change her name without changing her condition. However, she cannot think about such things since she has been a widow only six weeks. She prays that Welldon will not try to persuade her but she concedes he has the power to do so more than any other man on earth. She bluntly tells Welldon that she and her fortune are at his service.



Mr. Stanmore enters and taunts Mrs. Lackitt that her widowhood is quickly waning. Stanmore acknowledges that women will be lining up for the attractive Welldon. Stanmore tells Welldon he will handle the land deal between he and Mrs. Lackitt. Mrs. Lackitt drives too hard a bargain and will not be fair. Mrs. Lackitt states she offered him a fair deal and leaves in a huff. Stanmore once again tells Welldon that the widow will cheat him if she can. Welldon responds that he can cheat her by marrying her and taking her fortune. Stanmore concurs that Welldon would benefit from her great fortune and that he should marry her. Welldon backs off - he would never think of marrying the old, wanton witch. Stanmore tells Welldon that his cousin Jack is interested in the widow. Welldon will not stand in Jack's way, he can have her. Stanmore says he is looking forward to meeting Welldon's handsome cousin - Charlotte. Welldon explains that she has been sick. They should soon get word if she will be arriving or if she has died in England. Ships arrive everyday from England - the ones carrying slaves. Stanmore offers to show Welldon and Lucy around Surinam's trading port.

## Scene II

The governor and Blanford are talking. The governor tells Blanford that he loves his slave, Clemene, more every day. Mrs. Lackitt, Captain Driver and some farmers enter, as well as Welldon, Lucy, Stanmore and Jack Stanmore. The widow complains that all her slaves are women and children. The other farmers are happy with their lots of slaves. Mrs. Lackitt complains that the Captain has been unfair in the casting of the slaves lots. The Captain responds that everyone is satisfied but she and that she must pay and that no further lots will be cast. She further complains that he allowed a slave prince to be placed with all the other slaves. The Captain tells her that she will soon learn that the prince is no better than the other slaves.

Mrs. Lackitt counters that he would not mistreat her if her husband were alive - he agrees. She would hate to have to marry to elevate her position. Jack Stanmore offers himself but she rebukes him. He vows not to give up on her. Mrs. Lackitt is upset and wants to get away from the Captain. She tells Welldon to bring his sister for lunch. She rushes off.

Blanford chides the Captain about his treatment of Mrs. Lackitt - reminding him that she is very rich. The Captain is not interested in her money - he is rich himself. He is not interested in an old woman - he wants a young woman. Welldon interjects that there is a young woman - his sister, Lucy. The Captain asks whether Welldon would like him as a brother-in-law. Welldon agrees to have the Captain come by his house to meet his sister. If she likes him and Welldon agrees with the deal the Captain will offer for her, he will consider them marrying. Since the Captain deals in slavery, Welldon emphasizes that his sister is not a slave but a free woman.

Blanford is curious about the slave prince who is arriving. The prince is the son of the King of Angola. The Governor and Blanford are shocked at the boldness of the Captain in snatching this prince out of his own country. The Captain agrees that it was not easy. In fact, this prince used to gather the slaves for the traders. The prince's name is Oronoko. The Captain had invited him aboard his ship for a tour. He then got the



prince drunk and put him in shackles. Why, the Captain is asked, did he take such risks to get the prince and then sell him for just a common price. The Captain explains that Oroonoko was hard to handle and that he is glad to be getting rid of him even at a loss.

The slaves - men, women and children - enter. Oroonoko, in chains, is the last to enter. Lucy is appalled to see the slaves and learn that all their descendants are destined to be slaves as well. Blanford explains that they are accustomed to being slaves and know no better life - with the exception of Oroonoko. He has only known being a leader of his people. Blanford's heart bleeds for him. Oroonoko berates the Captain for betraying him and for not behaving like a good Christian. The Captain responds that he is a good Christian - a good Christian does not have to keep his word with a heathen. Oroonoko thanks the slaves for their loyalty to him when he was a prince. Now they are fellow-slaves. Death cannot be worse than their lives now. The Captain tells Blanford that he made sure none of Oroonoko's close followers were in the same lot with him to avoid any kind of revolt. Oroonoko warns the Captain to live in fear. Even though Oroonoko has no power, nature abhors dishonesty. The Captain will be driven out of society for his breach of faith. Oroonoko accepts his fate. Blanford takes Oroonoko's chains off and assures him that as the Governor's slave, he will be treated nobly.

Although he has been betrayed by the white man, Oroonoko is ready to learn his new role and what he must do. Chains and whips may overpower him physically but there is a deeper part of him that will never be touched or tamed. Blanford assures Oroonoko that he will be treated well. To help hide his identity from the other slaves, Blanford asks if he would like to be called by another name - perhaps Caesar? They explain that Caesar was not a slave but was betrayed by his friends who murdered him. Oroonoko tells the men that unlike Caesar he will survive. Blanford vows to serve Oroonoko.

## Act 1 Analysis

### Scene I

The first scene in Act I has a farcical element to it. The introduction to the book explains that Act I introduces the English sisters, Charlotte and Lucy Welldon. This secondary plot was designed to be the lighter, comic portion of the play. The two sisters are eager to marry and one of them, Charlotte, disguises herself as a man in order to purchase property when they move to the West Indies. The main plot is about the prince slave, Oroonoko, which is the serious, tragic part of the play. Some theatergoers at the time were unsettled that this tragic drama had a humorous sub-plot.

Charlotte and Lucy Welldon are English sisters who have grown disenchanted with husband-hunting in England. The men there have grown tired of them and want younger women. They have been ridiculed and called old, although they are apparently in their twenties. Another drawback they experienced in London was their lack of substantial dowries - an element that added to their unattractiveness. The sisters have set their fortunes on finding husbands in the new world, Surinam, in the West Indies, located in South America. To claim property - apparently women could not purchase



property in the West Indies - Charlotte has disguised herself as a man, Welldon, pretending to be Lucy's cousin.

Charlotte's disguise causes her problems when an old, rich widow, Mrs. Lackitt is not subtle in her interest in considering "Welldon" as a potential husband. Stanmore advises Welldon to consider the marriage opportunity since the widow is quite wealthy. Charlotte, who of course cannot marry the widow, pretends to consider a marriage but in the end complains that the woman is old and unappealing. Since Charlotte is interested in buying a plantation from Mrs. Lackitt, Stanmore volunteers to act as Charlotte's agent because the old widow will try to cheat him. The vice tightens around Charlotte when Stanmore indicates he is waiting for the arrival of Welldon's attractive cousin (actually Charlotte) to arrive. He finds her very attractive. Now Charlotte who is pretending to be a man has both a woman and a man interested in her.

## Scene II

Welldon is curious about slave trading and travels with Stanmore and Lucy to see a slave ship arrive with new slaves. Mrs. Lackitt is there along with the Governor and his assistant, Blanford. Captain Driver is the unscrupulous slave trader who is accused by Mrs. Lackitt of cheating her. She has received only women and children slaves. Lucy is appalled when she sees the "wretched slaves." She is heart-sick to learn that these people will be slaves all their days and their off-spring will as well. Lucy is ahead of her times in her empathy for the slaves. The Captain is interested in Lucy but he has not a chance as she finds his work disgusting.

A very vocal supporter of the slaves is the character Blanford. He is intrigued to hear that a royal slave prince is one of the new slaves. The slave prince is Oroonoko who speaks and behaves with grace and eloquence. Blanford is so taken with the prince and heart-sick to learn that he was tricked by Driver to become a slave. The notes and introduction make a comparison between the character Oroonoko and Shakespeare's Othello, which becomes more obvious as the story unfolds. Oroonoko is brave and accepts his awful fate but warns the Captain that nature itself will provide the comeuppance he deserves for his betrayal.



# Act II

## Act II Summary

### Scene I

Welldon and Lucy come to Mrs. Lackitt's house for lunch. Immediately the Widow Lackitt brings up the subject of marrying Welldon. Welldon puts her off by informing her that she vowed to Lucy's dying father that she would not marry until Lucy was married. Mrs. Lackitt has a quick solution to that problem - her son, Daniel. After a brief discussion, Welldon and Mrs. Lackitt agree to the marriage. Mrs. Lackitt, very smitten with Welldon, although understanding his wish to keep a promise, confesses she would break 20 promises for him.

Charlotte tells Lucy she has a husband for her while Mrs. Lackitt scurries off to fetch Daniel. Daniel is so shy he can barely look up. Mrs. Lackitt forces Daniel to kiss Lucy after which he is totally captivated but totally frightened at the prospect of marrying her and sleeping with her. Although he needs some confidence building, Mrs. Lackitt and Welldon agree on the marriage. Mrs. Lackitt expresses that it will be their turn next.

### Scene II

Blanford tries to assure Oroonoko that the Governor will be kind and fair to him and that he, Blanford, will serve him. Blanford understands why Oroonoko is distrustful of white men, after the trickery of the Captain. Blanford vows to find a way to send him back home to Africa. He assures Oroonoko that he will make sure his countrymen are treated gently. Though he would be glad to return home, Oroonoko reveals that he will never be truly happy as his beloved wife is missing or in fact dead.

At Blanford's urging, Oroonoko relates the story of his wife's disappearance. His wife, Imoinda, was the daughter of a white general in his father's army. As the child Imoinda grows into a woman, Oroonoko falls deeply in love with her. Imoinda returns those feelings and the two marry. Even though Oroonoko could legally have as many wives as he chose to have, he vowed to only have one - Imoinda. When tales of her beauty reach Oroonoko's father, the King of Angola, he demands that she come to his court. The King contemplated committing incest but resisted. Instead, he either poisoned her or set her off to a faraway land.

### Scene III

The Lieutenant Governor summons Blanford to bring the royal slave to his plantation. He wants to see the slave's reaction to his beautiful mistress. He calls on Clemene, his mistress - whose true identity is Imoinda, wife of Oroonoko - to sing songs for his guests. Clemene's eyes are always full of tears. The Governor tries to kiss her but she asks that he kill her instead. She runs off just before Blanford and Oroonoko arrive. The





Governor explains that he is having a difficult time dealing with his mistress. She is always in tears and is carrying a child.

Blanford defends Clemene, telling the governor that she cannot be loved against her will. Oroonoko is impressed with his compassion. All the men are in love with Clemene and all the women are jealous of her. The slaves begin their nightly entertainment with Clemene singing several songs. Oroonoko and the others enter near the end of the entertainment to learn that Indians are on their way to attack them. Oroonoko is a hero as he leads the others in a successful battle against the invaders. Oroonoko is stunned when Imoinda enters the scene - he thinks it is a trick or an illusion. When the two realize they are together again, they run to each other and embrace. Oroonoko loves her more than ever. He is no longer upset with the Captain. It was fate that he was captured and shipped to Surinam to find her. The Governor tells Stanmore privately that he will not be giving Clemene (Imoinda) up.

## Act II Analysis

### Scene I

Mrs. Lackitt is apparently very eager to marry Welldon. Charlotte (pretending to be Welldon) has thoughts of cheating the old widow out of her money so she plays along with talk of marriage. "Welldon" explains that he cannot marry until Lucy is married. She made that promise to her father on his deathbed. Although the valueless Lackitt announces she would break 20 promises to be with him, she understands his resolve to keep his vow. In short order, she fixes his problem. She calls out her rather dim-witted son, Daniel, to fill the bill. She forces Daniel to kiss Lucy, whom he can hardly look at due to his abnormal shyness. Although not stated, he apparently is at least socially challenged, if not mentally challenged. Welldon and Lackitt shake on the arrangement and Welldon unmercifully leads Lackitt on by telling the very smitten widow that she will be the next bride.

### Scene II

Blanford's great empathy for the plight of the slaves is front and center in this scene. He assures Oroonoko that the Governor will be kind to him. He, Blanford, will try to get him passage home. It is then revealed that Oroonoko is in mourning as he has lost his wife - she is either dead or missing. She was so beautiful that his father, the King of Angola, wanted her. The King could not bring himself to commit incest, but neither could he bear to see Imoinda with anyone else - even his son. He cruelly disposes of her and Oroonoko does not know whether she is alive or dead.

### Scene III

As it turns out she is very much alive and in Surinam. She was transported as a slave and was forced to become the mistress of the Governor. The Governor is in love with her and determined to make her truly his. She wants no part of him because she loves and misses Oroonoko. Finally, Imoinda and Oroonoko encounter each other and fall into

one another's arms. As an aside to Stanmore, the Lieutenant Governor reveals that he is not about to give her up. This foreshadows perhaps a tragic outcome for the defenseless slave prince, Oroonoko.



# Act III

## Act III Summary

### Scene I

At a plantation site, two slaves are discussing their plight. One is Aboan, a former follower of Oroonoko, and the other is Hottman. Hottman is very angry and speaks of revolt against the slave masters. He argues that the slaves must act as a unified body to fight against the plantation owners. Aboan is already planning an uprising but does not trust Hottman enough to make him part of the plot. Blanford asks the slaves who belonged to Oroonoko. When Aboan speaks up to acknowledge that he did belong to the prince, Blanford tells him to follow him.

### Scene II

Oroonoko and Imoinda are still relishing in their reunion. Oroonoko even confesses that he does not blame his father for wanting her—the power of her beauty is overwhelming. However, Oroonoko cannot forgive his father for selling her into slavery. Imoinda is happy for their chance to be together again but fears their time together will not last.

Blanford brings Aboan to Oroonoko who is gratified to see his most loyal servant again. Oroonoko is grateful to Blanford who responds that all he wants from Oroonoko is his trust. He tells Oroonoko that he has seen to it that all his followers will be treated gently. Aboan will be assigned to be Oroonoko's servant while he is there. Blanford tells him that he will soon be able to leave but to be cautious of others who do not look so favorably upon him.

Oroonoko expresses his trust in Blanford who has just departed. Aboan cautions him to trust no one but himself in securing his freedom. He fears that Oroonoko is not thinking correctly because he is so caught up in his love for Imoinda. It is more important to put his passion behind gaining freedom for himself as well as all the slaves. Aboan points out that they have more than double the man-power and sufficient strength to overthrow the slave masters. Aboan bluntly states that he would gladly cut their throats.

Oroonoko protests that Aboan would involve him in a murder plot. Aboan says rather than "murder" their plans should be described as self-defense for natural liberty. Oroonoko commands Aboan to not say another word nor even think of liberty. He subtly reminds Oroonoko that he is now a slave—a slave does not make commands. Liberty is all he has thought of from the moment the chains were placed on him. Oroonoko must think of Imoinda and will not murder, which would confirm to his captors that he deserves to be in chains. Besides, he and Aboan used to gather the slaves for trade—Aboan did not protest then.

Aboan tells Oroonoko that he does not understand what lies ahead—their captors punish and kill at even the least offense. The other slaves are looking to Oroonoko to



save them, lead them. He reminds Oroonoko that he is a prince, born to fight against oppression. Aboan's most convincing argument is that his heirs, the future princes, will be born only to become slaves. The destiny of the child that Imoinda now carries lies only in bondage. Imoinda, in tears, speaks up. She begs Oroonoko to kill her—to turn off her spring of life so that they bear no children whose life will be in slavery. Even Blanford, who is no doubt sincere in his best wishes, confesses that others are out to destroy Oroonoko. Imoinda acknowledges the reality that the Governor will take her away to be his which she will not be able to bear. For the cause of liberty and love, Oroonoko is persuaded to join in Aboan's plans to revolt.

### Scene III

Welldon visits Mrs. Lackitt who is anxious to marry him. The widow insists that since Lucy and Daniel are married, that it is their turn. Welldon tells Mrs. Lackitt the horrible news that he is already married. Mrs. Lackitt is outraged. She lashes out at Welldon and threatens to cut off the money she promised to Lucy and Daniel. Welldon calms Mrs. Lackitt down by promising to marry her once he ends his marriage to his wife who lives in England. She will dispatch a friend there to have his wife poisoned. They will then be able to marry. Mrs. Lackitt is satisfied with the plan but says in the meantime...she leaves for her bedroom. Welldon promises to follow. Stanmore enters and rescues Welldon—he will have his cousin, Jack Stanmore over, within the half-hour to handle the widow.

### Scene IV

Oroonoko, Aboan, Hottman and other slaves gather at the plantation to discuss their plans to fight for freedom. The slaves are upbeat with the prospect of having Oroonoko as their leader. Oroonoko's plan is a peaceful one. To avoid bloodshed, his plan is to march his followers to the beach and set up a new colony where they can live in peace and defend themselves until they are able to seize a ship and sail back to their homeland.

Aboan and Oroonoko conclude that Hottman is not fit to be part of their plan. Aboan attempts to stab Hottman but Oroonoko stops him. He warns the other slaves to keep an eye on one among them who cannot be trusted. In the morning, they will meet and try to seize the ship to take them home. His father's kingdom will welcome them all with open arms. If they do not succeed, they will die with the conviction that it is nobler to die than "drag the galling yoke of slavery."

## Act III Analysis

### Scene I

Aboan, a slave and former follower of Oroonoko, is discussing their planned revolt against their masters. One slave, Hottman, talks very bravely but Aboan does not trust him. This may be a hint that Hottman will present a barrier in their fight for freedom.



## Scene II

The happy reunion between Imoinda and Oroonoko is cut short by the words of Aboan. He tells Oroonoko of the slaves' plan to revolt and fight for their freedom. Oroonoko initially dismisses Aboan's words. He is so happy to be reunited with Imoinda that he thinks of nothing else. However, when Aboan reminds him that the child she is carrying and all future children they have will become slaves, Oroonoko's passion for freedom begins to stir. Aboan claims that the slaves are all depending upon him as their leader. He reminds him that he is a royal prince born to protect his people.

Imoinda would rather die than have her children in bondage. She makes Oroonoko face the reality that the Governor will take her back as his mistress. Oroonoko cannot bear the thought of losing Imoinda again and having his children become slaves. He vows to fight for love and liberty. At this point, it must have been obvious to the playgoers that tragedy is looming for Oroonoko, Imoinda and Aboan.

## Scene III

The situation with Charlotte/Welldon and Mrs. Lackitt is beginning to come to a head. Charlotte/Welldon is still leading Mrs. Lackitt on but Lackitt is smart and aggressive and time is running out on Charlotte's ruse. Daniel and Lucy have married and Lackitt is demanding that Welldon marry her. Charlotte/Welldon tells Lackitt she is married to a woman in England but plans to have someone kill her. Once she is dead, they will marry. Lackitt wants Welldon to have sex with her so Charlotte/Welldon recruits Jack Stanmore to sneak into her bedroom in the dark of night and handle the widow.

## Scene IV

The slaves gather for their revolt. Oroonoko's plan is to set up a defense at the beach and seize the next ship that comes and sail home. Just as Aboan had felt, Oroonoko does not trust Hottman. Aboan attempts to murder him but Oroonoko stops him. Oroonoko tells the slaves they must not fail; doing so will mean the death of them all. It will be better to die nobly than to live as a slave. Hottman continues to be a figure who has the potential to spoil their plans.



# Act IV

## Act IV Summary

### Scene I

Welldon has "married" Mrs. Lackitt but has recruited Jack Stanmore to bed her in the dark of night. Mrs. Lackitt and Welldon discuss their marriage. Lackitt could not be happier and more satisfied—she is deeply in love with her "husband" and he satisfies her. In her gratitude, she gives him some money and jewels. Daniel comes in the room followed by Lucy. Daniel is annoyed that Lucy follows him everywhere. Daniel tells his mother that he no longer loves Lucy.

Lucy becomes enraged and calls him a series of nasty names. Mrs. Lackitt admonishes her for calling Daniel names. Daniel responds that Lucy can call him "hermaphrodite" because he does not know if she is a boy or girl. Mrs. Lackitt becomes angry with her son and beats him. Lucy and Charlotte have a private discussion. Lucy reveals she has only a portion of the fortune. Lucy hears that an English ship is arriving soon and that there is a disturbance among the slaves. Charlotte plans to use the money and jewels Mrs. Lackitt gave her as a dowry for a husband.

Stanmore comes by and confirms with Welldon that Mrs. Lackitt will be free to marry Jack Stanmore. He tells Welldon that there is an uprising among the slaves, a mutiny. Welldon tells Stanmore she fears for her sister and cousin who will be arriving by ship. He gives Stanmore her jewels and money for safekeeping. The booty is to be a dowry for his arriving cousin. He asks Stanmore to care for his cousin if something should happen to him. Stanmore is indebted to Welldon for the suggestion that he marry his cousin if he is so disposed.

### Scene II

Oroonoko, Aboan, the other slaves and Imoinda with a bow and arrow enter, along with the other women and children slaves. Oroonoko tells Imoinda to take cover but she refuses—she will fight along side him. Aboan tells Oroonoko that he can blame himself if they fail for stopping him from killing Hottman. Hottman enters with the governor who is praising him for his loyalty to the government. Captain Driver, defending his ship, advances towards Oroonoko. Oroonoko kills the Captain.

The governor agrees that the Captain deserved death and has his body taken away. The governor pleads with Oroonoko to put down his sword, swearing that he and his men did not come to fight. He wants only the common safety and public good for all. Oroonoko will agree to disarm only if the governor calls off his men and leaves them alone. The governor fears they will not survive alone? They will all starve. The governor offers to pardon all the slaves of their misconduct. Everyone, except Imoinda and Aboan, leave Oroonoko and fall on the ground asking for the governor's forgiveness.



Oroonoko understands he was wrong to expect people who were born to live a wretched life to yearn for liberty. The governor gives Oroonoko his liberty but he will help him if he yields his weapons. Blanford is pleased that the governor is being fair. The Governor honors the high position that Oroonoko holds. Blanford gives up his sword to Oroonoko to show his support. Oroonoko thanks him for his friendship and embraces him but tells him it is too late. He cannot capitulate his pride even to save his life.

The Governor mentions Imoinda and how much Oroonoko loves her. Oroonoko responds that Imoinda has made him a coward—he is afraid to die and be without her, yet he is afraid to live and lose her. Blanford reminds him that he will soon be a father. The thought of his wife and child convince Oroonoko to yield his sword. Immediately, the Governor's men seize him and Aboan. Imoinda wants to die with Oroonoko but the Governor has her pulled away from Oroonoko who is spirited away with Aboan.

## Act IV Analysis

### Scene I

Welldon is able to keep Lackitt on the string by having Jack Stanmore have sex with her—in the dark. She is happy and in love with Welldon and tells him she is satisfied sexually. Jack and Welldon and Lucy are planning to abscond with Mrs. Lackitt's fortune. Charlotte gives Stanmore some money and jewels for safekeeping. She plans to use the money for her dowry.

### Scene II

Oroonoko and the slaves gather to begin their fight for freedom but are met by the forces of the Governor. Just as Aboan suspected, Hottman revealed their plans to the Governor. The slave trader, Captain Driver, heard that the slaves were going to seize his boat. He advances on Oroonoko who kills him. The governor and Blanford pleads with Oroonoko to give up but out of pride, Oroonoko refuses. All the slaves, except Aboan and Imoinda, collapse to the floor asking for the governor's mercy. Finally, when he is reminded of his love for Imoinda and their unborn child, Oroonoko yields his sword. As soon as he does, he and Aboan are seized and taken off. Blanford is astonished at the Governor's betrayal of Oroonoko. The Governor had vowed that he would never lose Imoinda. He has her pried away from Oroonoko to take her for himself. Barring some miracle, it is a certainty that Oroonoko and Aboan will die. The drama is now set for the conclusion. All signs are pointing to a sad ending for the slave prince.



# Act V

## Act V Summary

### Scene I

Charlotte has arrived from England and Welldon is missing. Perhaps, Stanmore guesses, he was a victim of the recent disturbances. Stanmore gives Charlotte the money and jewels Welldon left for her. Stanmore is so taken with Charlotte that he offers himself to her in marriage. Charlotte reveals to Stanmore that she had disguised herself as a man and that there is no "Welldon." Stanmore is surprised but nonetheless still has his sights on Charlotte.

Mrs. Lackitt enters with Daniel in tow. She announces that she has chastised him and forces him to beg Lucy for forgiveness. He kneels before Lucy who forgives him but warns him not to hurt her again. Lucy tries to represent Charlotte as her newly arriving sister but Lackitt sees through it. She recognizes Charlotte as her husband Welldon. Charlotte confesses to tricking her but will teach her how to never be so duped again.

Mrs. Lackitt is upset and laments the money and jewels she gave Charlotte. Charlotte counters that she had gotten her money's worth. The widow wonders if she is with child how she will know who the father is. Jack Stanmore reveals that he is the father of the child and agrees to marry her. Mrs. Lackitt blames only herself for falling for the trick and agrees to end the discussion and marry Jack Stanmore. A servant approaches Stanmore with a message from Blanford to meet him and bring as many men with him as possible.

### Scene II

Blanford is attempting to change the governor's mind about Oroonoko's fate. Stanmore, Jack, Daniel and the women arrive. Blanford beseeches the women to take up the lover's cause and intercede on behalf of the wretched woman, Imoinda. The plantation owners speak up. One says Oroonoko should be made an example of. The slaves will stay in their places and not attempt another uprising. They all agree that he should be hung. The widow speaks up against the hanging. Jack voices his opinion that the farmers are caught up in the excitement of the situation. Blanford reminds the governor that he gave his word that Oroonoko could have his freedom—one's word, one's honesty is all that anyone has.

Everyone urges the Governor to stand by his word and free Oroonoko, They will all vouch for his behavior. The Governor accedes and hands the responsibility for Oroonoko to Blanford and the others.

### Scene III





Blanford and the others find Oroonoko on his back and chained to the ground. They remove the chains and tell him they are all in support of him and that they loathe the treatment he has received. Blanford apologizes to Oroonoko for even being associated with those who would harm him. They have come to right all wrongs in his regard. Oroonoko responds that he will believe them if they can deliver his beloved Imoinda to him and swear to never seek vengeance against him. They promise to stand by him and bring his wife to him. They all leave and Oroonoko is alone. In a soliloquy, Oroonoko shows how conflicted he is. He expresses his doubts that he can forgive the betrayal of the Governor yet he does not want to act in the same treacherous way as did the Governor.

#### Scene IV

The governor to himself rationalizes about his relationship with Imoinda. He understands that to save her reputation she is pretending not to want him. He will allow her this pretense but in the end he knows she wants to be his mistress. Blanford, the Stanmores, Daniel, Mrs. Lackitt, Charlotte and Lucy all appear at the governor's house. They want Imoinda so they can reunite her with Oroonoko. He lies to them, claiming that he sent her off to Parham House. After they leave, he sizes Imoinda who grabs his sword in defense. Blanford reappears and demands the Governor release Imoinda. Imoinda escapes while Blanford is in a scuffle with the Governor. Servants come in to part them. The Governor and his servants run out after Imoinda.

#### Scene V

Oroonoko expresses his love for Imoinda—her love is more important than his fame or position. Aboan comes to Oroonoko, bloody and mangled. He comes to tell Oroonoko that he cannot bear to return to the life of a slave and be subjected to the beatings and humiliations. He asks that Oroonoko spare him and bring him to death. Oroonoko gives his loyal servant a dagger. Aboan stabs himself. In his dying words, he will not say goodbye to Oroonoko but rather that he will see him soon—he must follow him.

Imoinda comes rushing to Oroonoko. She tells him that she was seduced by the Governor and fell under his power. Oroonoko is pleased to hear that Blanford rescued Imoinda. Imoinda wants Oroonoko's promise that she will never be taken from him again. Oroonoko tells her that death is the only assurance they have but he could never bring himself to end her life. Imoinda does not want to live without Oroonoko. She tells him that their destiny is to die together. Imoinda senses that Oroonoko cannot speak those words although he knows them to be true.

Imoinda places a dagger in Oroonoko's hand and tells him that they cannot forget that their enemies are close. Oroonoko gives Imoinda a dying kiss and embrace. Imoinda opens her arms to welcome death but Oroonoko drops the dagger and collapses on the ground. He cannot take her life. She takes the dagger to stab herself but Oroonoko stops her. They hear a shout telling them that the enemy is near. Imoinda stabs herself while enclosed in Oroonoko's loving arms. Oroonoko lays by her and tells her he will soon be with her but he has one more deed to complete.



The Governor and Blanford enter. The governor tells Blanford that he tried in vain to save Oroonoko for he shall soon be dead. Blanford vows to defend Oroonoko with his own life. They see Oroonoko by the dead body of Imoinda. Oroonoko tells them he killed her. Oroonoko takes his sword and kills the Governor and stabs himself. He collapses dead on top of Imoinda.

Blanford says a prayer that Oroonoko finds happiness in the next world. He did as well as he could in this life. A Christian who goes astray has no such excuse.

## Act V Analysis

### Scene I

Charlotte now appears as herself and laments that her cousin, Welldon, is missing and must have gotten hurt in the uprising. Stanmore gives Charlotte the money and jewels the Welldon had given him for her. Stanmore is so taken with Charlotte that he immediately offers himself in marriage. Seeing that Stanmore is honest, Charlotte reveals that she had disguised herself as Welldon and had been a woman all along. Her ruse had allowed her to get Lucy married off and to line up Jack for Mrs. Lackitt. Mrs. Lackitt recognizes Charlotte right away as Welldon. She is more upset at herself for being duped and is happy to wind up with Jack—apparently she is with his child. This portion of the story has come to a happy ending—Charlotte will marry Stanmore; Mrs. Lackitt will marry Jack; and Daniel and Lucy are married.

### Scene II

Everyone, including the women, plead with the Governor to allow Oroonoko to have his freedom. He finally acquiesces and turns the responsibility for Oroonoko and his actions over to Blanford, et al.

### Scene III

Blanford and the others release Oroonoko from his chains and offer their support. He will only trust in them if they return Imoinda to him. With good reason, he holds much distrust of the white man's word.

### Scene IV

The Governor is fooling himself into believing the Imoinda really wants him. She only pretends to reject him to save her reputation. Blanford and the others confront the Governor and ask for Imoinda. He lies and tells them he sent her away. She is actually restrained there. She eventually escapes to find Oroonoko and the Governor and his men quickly follow her. The Governor is staying true to his word that he will not let her escape him. The odds of Oroonoko reuniting with her and living happily ever after are diminishing.

### Scene V



The highly principled slave, Aboan, refuses to return to the life of a slave and commits suicide. His dying words to Oroonoko is that he must follow him. Imoinda finds Oroonoko and sees Aboan's dead body. Although Oroonoko has a difficult time admitting the truth, Imoinda convinces him that the only way they can be together is to die. Finally, when they hear the others approach, Imoinda kills herself while Oroonoko holds her. When the Governor and the others arrive, Oroonoko whispers to Imoinda that he will soon be with her but has one last deed to carry out. He kills the Governor and then himself. The saddened Blanford prays for the soul of his friend, Oroonoko. Christians, like the sinful Governor have no excuse for their evil because they know better. The innocent Oroonoko did his best and cannot be held accountable for his sins.



# Characters

## Oroonoko

The play, "Oroonoko" proceeds on two levels. There is a sub-plot involving the husband-hunting Welldon sisters. This part of the play is intended to be light and comic. The main plot involves "Oroonoko" who is a slave prince. Oroonoko is the son of the King of Angola. In his homeland, Oroonoko amassed his countrymen to be sold as slaves to the traders dealing in human bondage between Africa and South America. Tragically, and ironically, Oroonoko becomes a slave himself. The slave trader, Captain Driver, invites Oroonoko on his slave ship on the premise of giving him a tour. The Captain gets Oroonoko so drunk that he passes out. The Captain then puts the prince in shackles and chains. When he awakens, he learns that he is on his way to South America as a slave.

Oroonoko impresses his owners. He is eloquent and brave. He accepts his horrific fate but warns the Captain that nature will deal with his betrayal. Oroonoko finds a friend and supporter in the Governor's assistant Blanford. Blanford feels great empathy for Oroonoko's plight and promises to protect and serve him and find a way to grant him passage back to his country. Blanford is further moved when Oroonoko reveals that his father, the King of Angola, had either exiled or murdered his beloved wife, Imoinda. His father was so taken with the beautiful Imoinda that he decided if he could not have her, his son would not either.

Shortly after arriving, Oroonoko discovers that the Lieutenant Governor's reluctant mistress, Clemene, is actually his lost love, Imoinda. Oroonoko and Imoinda are in ecstasy in finding one another again. The Lieutenant Governor who intends to make the beautiful Imoinda his and his alone vows that he will not lose her.

Oroonoko is trapped when a slave reveals to the Governor that he is leading the slaves in a revolt. After convincing Oroonoko that he will give him his freedom once he yields his weapon, Oroonoko surrenders. Immediately, he is seized by the Governor's men and placed into chains. The Governor takes Imoinda for himself. Blanford, ever loyal to Oroonoko, convinces the Governor to free Oroonoko. Blanford helps Imoinda escape from the Governor. Oroonoko and Imoinda realize they can only be together in death. Imoinda kills herself and Oroonoko slays the Governor before committing suicide.

## Imoinda

Imoinda is the daughter of a white general in the Angolan army. She grows up to be a beautiful and alluring young woman. Imoinda and Oroonoko fall in love and marry. She is so attractive that the King of Angola, who is Oroonoko's father, has her come to his court. When he realizes that his son is married to Imoinda, he cannot bring himself to commit incest even though he wants her desperately. However, he cannot bear to see



Imoinda with anyone else, even his son, so he sends her away, unbeknownst to Oroonoko, to Surinam as a slave. Oroonoko does not know whether his father has killed Imoinda or sent her into exile. Nonetheless, his heart is broken because he is no longer with his beloved wife.

When Oroonoko is tricked by the slave trader and becomes a slave himself, he is sent to Surinam. Imoinda's name has been changed to Clemene and she has been selected to become the governor's mistress. She will not allow the governor to kiss her or hold her hand—she would rather die. She is miserable because she misses her husband and is carrying his child. When the two encounter each other in Surinam, they are reunited and love each other more than ever. Rather than bring her child into the world to be a slave, she asks Oroonoko to kill her. He vows to defend his love for her and his liberty and find a way back to their homeland to live as a free family.

Unfortunately, in the end Oroonoko and Imoinda realize they can only be together in death. They both commit suicide.

## **Charlotte Welldon**

Charlotte Welldon is one of the sisters who comes from London to Surinam to find a husband. Charlotte disguises herself as a man so she can purchase property.

## **Lucy Welldon**

Lucky Welldon is one of the sisters who comes from London to Surinam to find a husband. She winds up marrying Daniel Lackitt.

## **Widow Lackitt**

Widow Lackitt is the rich widow in Surinam who wants to marry Welldon, who is actually Charlotte disguised as a man.

## **Stanmore**

Stanmore is an official on the island—perhaps an attorney. He warns Charlotte that the old widow will try to cheat him in a land purchase he is contemplating. He winds up with Charlotte.

## **Captain Driver**

Captain Driver is the slave trader who brings Oroonoko to the West Indies. He is treacherous and dishonest.



## **Governor**

The Governor of Surinam owns both Imoinda and Oroonoko. He makes the beautiful Imoinda his mistress.

## **Blanford**

Blanford is an assistant to the Governor and very sympathetic to the slaves. He is heart-sick at Oroonoko's plight and vows to serve him and help him return home.

## **Daniel Lackitt**

Daniel Lackitt is the dim-witted son of Widow Lackitt. She forces him to marry Lucy so she can marry Welldon.

## **Jack Stanmore**

Jack Stanmore is a cousin of Stanmore, the attorney. He wants to marry the Widow Lackitt.

## **Aboan**

Aboan is the loyal servant of Oroonoko. He commits suicide rather than live his life as a slave.

## **Hottman**

Hottman is the slave who betrays the slaves in their revolt.



# Objects/Places

## London, England

London, England, is the hometown of the Welldon sisters. They cannot find husbands in London and decide to try their luck in the West Indies.

## Surinam

Surinam is the region in the West Indies to which the Weldon sisters relocate in an attempt to find husbands. The entire play takes place in Surinam.

## West Indies

Surinam, an English colony, is where the entire play takes place. The region is also known as the West Indies.

## South America

Surinam, West Indies, is located on the northeastern side of South America.

## Slave Ship

The slaves from Africa arrive in Surinam on slave ships. They are large ships equipped with chains and shackles to keep the slaves restrained.

## Plantations

The wealthy residents of Surinam own plantations. Charlotte plans to purchase a plantation from the rich widow Lackitt. Many of the scenes take place outside on the vast plantations.

## Citron Grove

The citron grove is where Oroonoko, Aboan and the other slaves meet to wage their revolt against the slave owners.



## **The Governor's House**

The Governor's House is where Blanford and the others confront the governor. They want to take Imoinda and return her to Oroonoko.

## **Parham House**

The governor lies to Blanford and the others who want to find Imoinda. He tells them he sent her to Parham House.

## **Angola**

Angola is Oroonoko's place of birth. His father is the King of Angola.





# Themes

## Betrayal/Deception

"Oroonoko" the drama begins on a light note with the story of Charlotte and Lucy Weldon. The Weldon sisters have given up on husband-hunting in their birthplace, London, England. They speak of rejection and ridicule by the young men there. They wear masks in London to present themselves as different women but to no avail; this is the first hint that they are not above deceiving people to get what they want. Charlotte ups the deception ante when the sisters travel to Surinam, West Indies, for a fresh start. Presumably, women could not purchase land in that country. To counter this barrier, Charlotte poses as a young man, Lucy's cousin. The ruse presents a whole new set of problems when an old, rich widow—Mrs. Lackitt—shows a romantic interest in Charlotte whom she thinks is a young man. Charlotte plays along and even "marries" Lackitt. She arranges for a man, Jack Stanmore who wants to marry the widow, to have sex with her in the dark of night, pretending to be Weldon (Charlotte). The goal of Charlotte's deception is to abscond with the old woman's fortune.

Deception and betrayal of a more serious nature emerges quickly in the part of the play about the prince slave, Oroonoko. The prince's first encounter with deception comes from his own father. He is the son of the King of Angola. The King is so enraptured with Oroonoko's wife, Imoinda, that he sends her off to be a slave. If he cannot have her no one can—not even his son. Oroonoko's heart is broken—he does not know if Imoinda is dead or sent into exile.

One of Oroonoko's duties is to gather people for the slave traders. One of these traders, Captain Driver, invites Oroonoko on board his slave ship on the premise of giving him a tour. Instead, the Captain gets Oroonoko drunk, shackles him and sells him as one of the slaves. Oroonoko accepts his horrid fate but warns Driver that nature will deal with his act of betrayal.

Oroonoko leads the slaves in a revolt against their owners in Surinam. He is betrayed by one of the slaves, Hottman, who cues in the governor on the plans for revolt. After being confronted by the Governor and his forces, all of Oroonoko's followers except his wife and one other slave, abandon him and ask for the Governor's forgiveness. The Governor assures Oroonoko that he if yields his sword, all will be forgiven. After Oroonoko capitulates and surrenders, in another act of betrayal, the Governor has Oroonoko seized and steals his wife for his own purposes.

## Man's Freedom/Slavery

It is tragic irony that the man who gathered slaves for sale in his country, Prince Oroonoko, is betrayed by the slave trader and becomes a shackled slave himself. Although, of course, unhappy with his fate, the eloquent Oroonoko is brave and accepts



it. He tells his captor, Captain Driver, that though he may be able to make him submit physically, he will never conquer his spirit, which is free and strong.

Oroonoko finds a friend and supporter in the Governor's assistant, Blanford, who has great empathy for the slave prince's plight. He promises to serve him and protect him. Blanford tells Oroonoko that he will try to devise a way to allow Oroonoko passage back to Africa. Only then, it appears, does Oroonoko think of the other slaves—some of whom were handed their fate from the actions of Oroonoko himself. He asks Blanford how the others will be treated. Oroonoko then speaks rhetorically asking if Blanford can raise the dead—the many thousands of men and women preceding him who lived and died in bondage.

When Lucy Welldon, a transplanted English woman, first lays eyes on the "wretched" slaves, she is appalled. She is further dismayed to hear that the slaves know no other way to live and that they and all their descendants are destined to lives of bondage.

Although the novel and play about the slave prince Oroonoko was written in 1695, it is obvious that outrage about slavery was abundant. The play, while a tragic love story, also does much to highlight the plight of slaves.

## Women's Inequality

Charlotte and Lucy Welldon are from London, England, and have moved to Surinam, the West Indies, to find a husband. They complain that husband-hunting in London has become impossible. The young men have all grown tired of their faces. They even try disguising themselves but to no avail. None of the men are interested in them. Charlotte reminds her sister that, "Women in London are like the rich silks; they are out of fashion a great while before they wear out."

Even though the sisters apparently are in their twenties, they discuss the comments that they are like their "landladies" — old that is. Lucy laments about the "double-standard" existing in London. She says that men are young all their lives while women begin to decay when they are in their early twenties. Uncanny as it may seem, in 1695 when this play was written, the women were concerned with a double-standard between men and women. Strangely, so many years later, that double-standard in many ways still exists. It makes one question the progress, or lack there of, of modern society.

Charlotte disguises herself as a man; she pretends to be Lucy's male cousin rather than her sister. She executes this deception because she wants to purchase land in Surinam and apparently women could not buy real estate in that time period.

The slaves are of course destined for a miserable, hapless life of serving the needs and wants of others. However, even in this class, women are reduced to an even lower than the male slaves. The beautiful Imoinda, who is Oroonoko's wife, is forced to be the governor's mistress as well as a slave. She becomes a slave because her father-in-law, the King of Angola, lusts for her. He will not commit incest but his jealousy drives him to

send her away as a slave because he cannot bear to have anyone else have her, even his own son.

# Style

## Point of View

The play, "Oroonoko" was written by playwright and author James Southerne. He based his play on a novel written by female author Aphra Behn who authored the novella in 1688. The point of view, therefore, has a unique duality. Throughout the book, the question of women's equality emerges. This issue is likely a favorite one of the novel's author, Aphra Behn; although, Southerne, a man, addresses the issue in an earlier original play, "The Maid's Last Prayer." In fact, Southerne was a popular dramatist of women of that era, as his characterizations seemed to be particularly sympathetic toward women.

The women's rights issue first surfaces in the beginning scene when Charlotte and Lucy Welldon are introduced. They are transplants from London who have failed to capture husbands on the home front. They are hoping for a fresh start and to find husbands in the English colony of Surinam. The opening scenes highlight the "double-standard" that exists in England between the sexes. Lucy comments that men are young all their lives while women begin to decay in their early twenties. It is amazing to learn that in 1695 the "double standard" between men and women exists and is not unlike its counterpart in the early 21st century. The more things change, the more they stay the same!

As far as the more serious plot involving the slaves, the playwright James Southerne was a well-established playwright of note when he wrote "Oroonoko" and therefore his work was viewed with due respect. A revolt by slaves had occurred in Jamaica a few years before this play was written and as a result there existed a wealth of sympathy for slaves. Liberal writers found a compelling and compassionate cause in spinning tales about the slaves, Southerne among them. There are obvious literary references in "Oroonoko" — some critics comparing the character to Shakespeare's Othello. In one scene, a character suggests that "Oroonoko" be called Caesar—a reference to royalty as well as Shakespeare? Perhaps to spare the audience, Southerne tamped down the violence described in Behn's novel.

The play ends with the death of Oroonoko and Imoinda. Before Oroonoko kills himself to be with Imoinda, he kills the governor. Southerne and/or Behn ends on a religious note. The character Blanford who proved to be a loyal friend to Oroonoko says a prayer for the slave prince. His words excuse the pagan Oroonoko for his sins—sins for which a Christian could not be pardoned—a final message to the white Christians who were exploiting and destroying the lives of the slaves.

## Setting

Although there are references to London, England and Angola, the entire play, "Oroonoko" takes place in Surinam, which is a country in the northeast part of South



America, also called the West Indies. During the era in which this drama was written, Surinam was an English colony. Due to its geographic location, the country of Surinam enjoys a warm, tropical climate. The country has a northern coast on the Atlantic Ocean where the ships landed bringing the slaves that had been sold to planters.

There are vast plantations owned by wealthy landowners where some of the scenes take place. All the scenes involving slaves take place "in the open" while many of the scenes with the white characters take place inside their palatial homes. Although the weather is temperate, a sharp contrast exists between the scenes involving whites and those with the black slaves. The slaves are never placed on the inside of a building during a scene leaving the reader to assume they lived outside. There is no mention about the crops grown on the plantations but one could imagine the agricultural products grown could include sugar, bananas, cotton, cocoa and other such products grown in tropical climates.

When the slaves band together to plot a revolt, they plan to meet in the citron grove, an area where citrus trees are abundant. They plan to seize a slave ship and sail back home with their wives and children to Angola in Africa. The slave ship is mentioned as having areas where the slaves can be chained and shackled during the voyages.

## Language and Meaning

The introduction to the play explains that some wording and spelling was modernized in this restored version of the 1695 play about the prince slave, Oroonoko. However, there are still Old English terms interspersed throughout the work. Perhaps to facilitate the speaking roles, there is frequent use of shortened words that may represent a dialect or a manner of speaking of those times. For example, the phrase "on't" appears on occasion that obviously represents a character's sentiment that the other person understands: you are "on it" or "you're correct." Another stand-out in this category is: "i'faith" (in faith). Examples of diction/dialect spelling improvisations include pow'r, belov'd, swell'n, pois'nous and there are other examples.

There are words that are not seen in today's English and other terms whose meanings have changed over the centuries. For example, the Welldon sisters discuss how they disguised themselves in "vizard-masks." The note explains that vizard-masks were made of black velvet and concealed the entire face. The term eventually came to be synonymous with "whore" and the masks were outlawed by Queen Anne. The word "compass" is used to mean "contrive" or "devise." There are many other examples of obsolete words and Old English meanings, explained by comments in the notes sections.

The use of charactonyms for the last names of some of the characters is apparent. For example, the Widow Lackitt is a woman with no scruples or values, in other words she is lacking in many ways—she "lacks it." The Welldon sisters "do well"—especially Charlotte Welldon—who succeeds in her ruse of posing as a man. Her portrayal is a job "well done." A slave oddly named "Hottman" is an angry ringleader of plans for a revolt



against the slave owners. His angry dialog confirms that the man is indeed "hot" (under the collar). The most obvious use of a charactonym is for the slave trader, Captain Driver—as in "slave driver." There could be other not so obvious meanings attached to other character names. However the self-describing names of these aforementioned characters were chosen carefully.

## Structure

"Oroonoko" is a play with two running plots. The first story introduced to the audience is the story of the Welldon sisters of London, England. Although this plot is the first one presented, it is the lighter, secondary portion of the play. The main plot centers around the tragedy of the prince slave, Oroonoko, from Angola, Africa.

The play is segmented into five acts. The first act consists of two scenes—the first introducing the Welldon sisters and their husband-hunting woes and Charlotte's ruse of posing as a man. The second scene brings the Welldon sisters, a slave trader and some slaves together for the first and only time. Act II has three acts, the two longer of which focus on the main story of Oroonoko. Act III has four acts in which Oroonoko is reunited with his estranged wife, Imoinda, and is convinced to lead a revolt of the slaves against their owners. Act IV has two acts which reveal further deception by Charlotte Weldon and the betrayal by the Governor of Oroonoko. Act V has five acts which resolve the issues of both the major and secondary plots. The light story ends happily with the Welldon sisters both finding husbands. The story of Oroonoko ends in tragedy.

The book contains an extensive introduction which covers details of the restoration of this play originally written in the 17th century. The introduction also provides a history of the play and the novel it was based on and how the play was received by critics and audiences of the time. The story is followed by an epilogue which consists of a poem written by a colleague of Southerne's and read by the character, Charlotte. Appendix A is a guide for the music to be used for the play. Appendix B provides a chronology of the entire works of the play's author, Thomas Southerne.



## Quotes

"Women in London are like the rich silks; they are out of fashion a great while before they wear out." (12)

"'Tis very hard; the men must be young as long as they live, and poor women be thought decaying and unfit for the town at one or two and twenty." (12)

"Nature abhors and drives three out from society and commerce of mankind for breach of faith." (31)

"Thou god-adored! Thou ever-glorious sun! If she be yet on earth, send me a beam of they all-seeing power to light me to her. Or if thy sister goddess has preferred her beauty to the skies to be a star, O tell me where she shines, that I may stand whole nights and gaze upon her." (43)

"For my part, while I have a life and tongue, I'll curse the authors of my slavery." (58)

"I have long suffered it with a mother's laboring pains and can no longer. Kill me, kill me now while I am blest and happy in your love rather than let me live to see you hate me, as you must hate me—me, the only cause, the fountain of these flowing miseries. Dry up this spring of life, this pois'nous spring that swells so fast to overwhelm us all." (65)

"But if we fail in our attempt [to gain freedom], 'tis nobler still to die than drag the galling yoke of slavery." (75)

"Have you no reverence of future fame? No awe upon your actions from the tongues, the censuring tongues of men that will be free? If you confess humanity, believe there is a God, or devil, to reward our doings here, do not provoke your fate. The hand of heaven is armed against these crimes with hotter thunderbolts prepared to shoot and nail you to the earth a sad example, a monument of faithless infamy." (103)

"Lying's a certain mark of cowardice; and when the tongue forgets its honesty, the heart and hand may drop their functions too and nothing worthy be resolved or done." (108)

"No man condemn me who has never felt a woman's power or tried the force of love. All tempers yield and soften in those fires. Our honors, interests resolving down, run in the gentle current of our joys, but not to sink and drown our memory. We mount again to action like the sun that rises from the bosom of the sea to run his glorious race of light anew and carry on the world. Love, love will be my first ambition, and my fame the next." (112)

"O! That we could incorporate, be one, one body, as we have been long one mind. That



blended so, we might together mix, and losing thus our beings to the world, be only found to one another's joys." (120)

"I hope there is a place of happiness in the next world for such exalted virtue. Pagan or unbeliever, yet he lived to all he knew; and if he went astray, there's mercy still above to set him right. But Christians guided by the heavenly ray have no excuse if we mistake our way." (124)





## Topics for Discussion

Why do the Welldon sisters leave London, England, and relocate to Surinam, West Indies?

How was Oroonoko duped into becoming a slave? Who was behind this betrayal and how did Oroonoko react to this person's treachery?

Why does Oroonoko's father send his wife away? What does Oroonoko think happened to his wife and how do they reunite again?

How do Aboan and Imoinda convince Oroonoko to lead the slave revolt? Who betrays Oroonoko and reveals his plans to the Governor?

What character was Oroonoko's biggest supporter? How did this character display his respect and admiration for Oroonoko?

How does Charlotte handle her "marriage" to Mrs. Lackitt and what is Charlotte's real interest in the widow? How does another character help Charlotte deal with Mrs. Lackitt?

How do Oroonoko and Imoinda die? What one deed does Oroonoko complete before he dies?