

Lindsey Lanfersieck

English

Year in School: Junior

Hometown: St. Louis, Mo.

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Devoney Looser, English

Funding Source: Department of English

Race relationships in Aphra Behn's Oroonoko

Lindsey Lanfersieck & Devoney Looser

A number of scholars classify Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* as one of the first anti-slavery or abolitionist narratives. However, my research discusses the seemingly problematic nature of Behn's text because of her decision to characterize Oroonoko, an enslaved African prince, as separate and above the rest of the slave population. Therefore, I identify numerous examples within the text that then complicate the critics' decisions to classify the text as "solely abolitionist." Foremost, Behn's relationship with the Surinam Indians provides valuable insight as to why slavery exists between white Americans and African-Americans but not native people. Additionally, my findings suggest that Behn's text attacks the unchristian slave-owners for their immoral practices such as deceiving and lying to Oroonoko but not for actually enslaving him. Also, Oroonoko's attitude toward the rest of the non-Europeanized slave population again calls attention to the separation that exists between the slave classes. Because Behn chooses to revere only Oroonoko and his wife, Imoinda then, her ignorance towards the rest of the population again complicates the text's classification as "abolitionist." Additionally, in order to gain a sense of how others perceived Behn's narrative, my research then discusses and compares Thomas Southerne's adaptation of *Oroonoko* in play format, where he chooses to alter the skin color of Oroonoko's wife from black to white. Furthermore, my close examination of Behn's text is supplemented with political cartoons and travel narratives that similarly depict other races in order to historicize the 17th century.