

Are we to trust narrator: the problem of reliability



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Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* leaves home to see the world, only to find himself in a shipwreck, leaving him stranded on a deserted island for years, while Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* is a royal prince turned slave who meets his ultimate demise in the African country of Surinam. Both Defoe and Behn employ similar techniques of first-person narration in their respective stories, and while this position is advantageous to each narrator's status within their texts, the reliability of each narrator differs significantly.

Behn's narrator's absence from the majority of the events she depicts serves to seriously discredit her narrative reliability. Though the female narrator claims to "have often seen and conversed with [Oroonoko], and been a witness to many of his mighty actions" (2140), it is the detailed accounts she provides the reader of "what [she] could not be witness of" that becomes increasingly problematic. Aside from the events that she personally witnesses, Behn's narrator is only able to convey a second-hand account that she receives "from the mouth of the chief actor in this history, the hero himself, who gave us the whole transactions of his youth" (2137). At one point, when speaking of Oroonoko and Imoinda blushing upon seeing each other, the narrator, though not in attendance for this particular event, speculates that "'tis certain that both these changes were evident, this day, in both these lovers" (2145). Again, while she neither personally witnesses these events nor gives any mention of speaking directly to anyone other than Oroonoko himself, the narrator is quick to stray from a viewpoint of objectivity and form assumptions of other characters' beliefs and emotions: When the King reflects on his decision to enslave both Imoinda and Oroonoko the narrator explains that "he believed he had made a very great

conquest over himself when he had once resolved, and had performed what he resolved. He believed now that his love had been unjust" (2150). We can see the narrator's presumptions of Imoinda's emotions again despite her fleeting presence when she explains that when " the Prince softly wakened Imoinda, who was not a little surprised with joy to find him there, she trembled with a thousand fears" (2149). Because of her absence for many of the critical events in the story, the secondary nature of her conveyance of information, and her inability to remain objective, Behn's female narrator is fallible.

Though Robinson Crusoe recalls his story almost entirely from memory, it is through his ability to reflect on his past adventures retrospectively in which he achieves reliability as a narrator. Robinson Crusoe often reveals to the reader what he remembers his thoughts to be at the time of each particular memory or situation, compared to what they are now in retrospect. When reflecting on his choice to defy his father's wishes and go to sea, Robinson Crusoe explains that " had [he] now had the sense to have gone back to Hull, and have gone home, [he] would have been happy" (14), remembering that he " used to look upon [his] condition with the utmost regret" (32).

Reminiscing of his first journey at sea, Robinson Crusoe admits that " it was [his] great misfortune that in all these adventures [he] did not ship [him]self as a sailor" (16), recalling what a " loose and unguided fellow [he] then was" (16). In addition to these reflections, Crusoe does not conceal from the reader when he is uncertain of the exact details of his story; after escaping captivity from his master by stealing his fishing boat, Robinson Crusoe explains that in his ploy to make it to the coast, he " came to an anchor in

the mouth of a little river” in which he “knew not what, or where; neither what latitude, what country, what nations, or what river” (22). When reflecting upon his ability to grow various types of food on the island, Crusoe explains that he “had near two bushels of rice, and above two bushels and half of barley, that is to say, by my guess, for I had no measure at that time” (100). Of his first months on the island, Crusoe reflects that he “[did] not remember that [he] had in all that time one thought that so much as tended either to looking upwards toward God, or inwards towards a reflection upon [his] own ways” (76), explaining that he “was merely thoughtless of a God, or a Providence; acted like a mere brute from the principles of nature” (76). Unlike Behn’s female narrator, Robinson Crusoe achieves reliability as a narrator through his tendencies to reflect and provide the reader with comments on his past in retrospect, while also admitting his uncertainty of specific details.

Though Behn’s and Defoe’s narrators differ significantly regarding their credibility in the relation of their respective texts, both Robinson Crusoe and Behn’s female narrator’s positions as narrators allow them to manipulate their position within the novel in a light that is advantageous to them in that it comments on their social status and power. Behn’s female narrator establishes a higher social status than that of many of the other characters in the novel when she tells the reader that “[her] stay was to be short in that country, because [her] father died at sea, and never arrived to possess the honor was designed him (which was lieutenant-general of six and thirty islands, besides the continent of Surinam)” (2162), adding that “as soon as [she] came into the country, the best house in it was presented [to her]”

(2163). The way in which the narrator portrays her apparently tight-knit relationship with the story's protagonist, Oroonoko, is also significant in that it illuminates the power she is able to exercise over the text in order to cast herself in a positive light; the narrator reveals that Oroonoko "had an entire confidence" in her (2162), while mysteriously disappearing during every instance of Oroonoko's "ill treatment" (2173). Like Behn's female narrator, Robinson Crusoe, too, immediately makes known to the reader that "[he] was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family" (5). Of his position on the island, Crusoe regards himself as "lord of the whole mannor; or if [he] pleased, [he] might call [himself] King, or emperor over the whole country which [he] had possession of" (109), additionally indicating in a journal entry that the sixth of November meant it was "the sixth year of [his] reign" (117) of his "castle" (131) or "enterprise" (160). Lastly, Robinson Crusoe's first meeting with Friday is highly indicative of the power he believes he possesses on the island: "I made him know his name should be Friday, which was the day I saved his life. I likewise taught him to say Master, and then let him know, that was to be my name" (174). While Behn's female narrator and Robinson Crusoe differ in the credibility of their respective narratives, their position as a first-person narrator is significant to each text in that it allows each narrator to position themselves in a positive light.

While Behn's female narrator lacks credibility due to her absence in the majority of the events she depicts, as well as her failure to remain an objective third-party narrator, Robinson Crusoe achieves narrative reliability through his ability to reflect back on his past retrospectively. Both Behn's

narrator and Robinson Crusoe's role as first-person narrators is significant in that it allows each narrator a certain authority over their texts in which they can manipulate their social status or position themselves to appear in a positive light in comparison with other characters in their novels.

Works Cited

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