

Are Such Things Done on Albion's Shore?

The Discourses of Slavery in the Rhetoric of English Jacobin Writers

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There seems to be a growing consensus among both historians and literary critics that anti-slavery protests in prose and poetry were second only to the French Revolution in their impact on the social consciousness of writers in Britain from 1780 to 1830 (Mellor, 311). Additionally, within the last three years, building upon the work of historians such as Linda Colley, *Britons, Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*, and the work of literary critics such as Moria Ferguson and Ann Mellor, an argument has developed which states that the attempt by women to end British involvement in the slave trade and to emancipate the slaves in British crown colonies in the West Indies was central to the development of British feminism and to women's participation in public politics throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This paper will continue such arguments by exploring three different ways in which the discourses of slavery and enslavement in the later part of the eighteenth century are used by both male and female writers to evoke "a new humanitarian sensibility based upon sympathy, equality, and understanding" (Ellis, 50-55). I will argue that after 1780, the discourse of slavery is often deployed transferentially to evoke rights and to cryptically inscribe related issues (Ferguson, 186; Ellis, 55). Here the significant fact is the conjunction of race and gender – slavery is made to figure gender relations and suggest an overlapping between

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victims of forced marriages, imprisoned debtors, and Caribbean slaves. The final part of the paper will examine the figurative use of confinement by William Blake in which the "mind forg'd manacles" of slavery are self-created; describing possible subject positions of both victim and victimizer.

The leading public voices of the Abolitionist movement were male in the period 1770-1800; figures such as Granville Sharp, William Roscoe, Thomas Clarkeson, and William Wilberforce. The largest and most sustained outcry against both the slave trade and the institution of slavery was organized by the Quakers, who established antislavery societies throughout England between 1780 and 1830. In these antislavery societies women were major participants. For example in the late 1780s and early 1790s, women organized a national campaign to boycott the use of sugar and became the dominant force in the petition drives to abolish slavery in British colonies. Hannah More's forthright attack on the slave trade in her poem "Slavery, A Poem" first published in 1788, is representative of work by other women writers and was widely reprinted throughout the period. In this poem, she insists on the common humanity that Africans share with Europeans – "Respect His sacred image which they bear./... Let malice strip them of each other plea,/They still are men, and men should still be free" (More, 10). An earlier poem by Thomas Day, *The Dying Negro* published in 1773, uses almost the same language but his argument is framed using natural law: all men are born equal with certain unalienable rights. Day's poem, in the voice of a slave, asks slave owners to consider:

And thou, whose impious avarice and pride
Thy God's blest symbol to my brows denied
Forbade me or the rights of man to claim.
Or share with thee a Christian's hallowed name,
Thou too farewell! – for not beyond the grave

Thy power extends, nor is my dust thy slave.
Go bribe thy kindred ruffians with thy gold,
But dream not nature's rights are bought and sold. (Day, 6)

Both these writers arguments are based upon a shared assumption that slave and master partake of a common humanity in Christianity, and that the "right" to be free is based upon a morality which condemns the buying and selling of persons and the denial of their natural rights.

Recently the critic Ann Mellor has argued that there is a difference in the writing of men and women abolitionists from the late 1780s to the early nineteenth century. Women writers such as Hannah More, Helen Maria Williams, and Anna Barbauld tend to condemn slavery because it violates domestic affections and relationships; while male writers such as William Wilberforce, William Pitt, and William Roscoe argue that under a just system of natural law, all individuals should be treated equally (Mellor, 315-17). Another way to make this distinction is to recognize two strategies in anti-slavery discourse operating simultaneously: on the one hand, a secular discussion of the problem of slavery mounted along moral and philosophical lines growing out of a concern with liberty and constraints upon it. On the other hand, among Quakers and later the Methodists, there is a focus on religious humanism which emphasizes issues of treatment; personal cohesion and abuse; and the desirability of conversion of slaves (Ellis, 51-55). My research has led me to conclude both sets of arguments, the rhetoric of an Anglo-Christian humanism and the rhetoric of natural rights, were equivalent for both sets of writers. In the words of historian Winthrop Jordan, "to be Christian was to be civilized rather than barbarous, English rather than African, white rather than black" (Ferguson, 5). Africans were described by most abolitionists, in the words of Hannah More, as "though dark and savage, ignorant and blind,/They claim the common privilege of kind;/Let malice strip them of each other plea,/They still are men, and men should still be free" (quoted

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by Mellor, 318). Note the word "still," in this quotation. It represents a desire of both men and women abolitionists to affirm their difference from and superiority to black men and women while not denying them their natural rights.

The discourse of slavery was also a commonplace of sentimental fiction from 1750-1795 and was evoked by both men and women writers. The most famous example is the scene from Lawrence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768) in which Yorrick's caged starling becomes an emblem for amelioration of conditions of slaves. Yet the story of slavery is never told in the novel, rather "it is managed out of the novel, to be replaced or augmented by the more particular and metropolitan themes of incarceration and liberty (Ellis, 71). The black speckled bird and his four words "I can't get out" have received close and careful explication by Sterne's critics. I do not wish to sort out these arguments today, but instead to emphasize that for Sterne's readers, as well as other writers of sentimental fiction in the period, this novel provided a set of restricted scenes of incarceration in which a single captive object or person could be read as an emblem of "the millions of my fellow creatures born to no inheritance but slavery" (Sterne, 72). The figurative use of slavery is rhetorically slippery here transferring the signifier into varying and various signified: "articulating issues of contemporary note, such as marriage, imprisonment, or labor" (Ellis, 50).

In 1775, the well known actress and mistress of the Prince of Wales, Mary Darby Robinson, wrote *Captivity: A Poem* which used the same sentimental scenario of the captured song bird (a linnnet in this case) but to denote a women's life as prisoner of marriage, gender expectations, and fashion. According to Moria Ferguson this is the first use of, what will become, a commonplace trope in late eighteenth century feminist rhetoric. In other words, these female writers use slavery as the metaphorical sign of marriage. For example

always to be produced by vital blood? Is one half of the human species, like the African slaves, to be subject to prejudices that brutalize them, ... only to sweeten the cup of men" (144-5)? The equation of race and gender here is problematic as recent critics have pointed out (Sharp, 39-42). Race and gender are not corresponding functions, despite the fact that people of color and white women share subordinate positions in relationship to white men within a European imperial matrix of power.

However, this was not the only use of the trope of slavery in the 1780s and 1790s. It was also used metaphorically to attack "enslavement" or the "dependency" of women on gender ideologies of the feminine. Women are seen to be "slaves of fashion" or "dependents of their family or husband"; enslaved by the social construction of gender within education, marriage, or the family. Mary Hays writes in 1799 that "The canker most pernicious to every virtue is dependence, and the most fatal species of bondage is subjection to the demands of our imperious passions" (*Victim of Prejudice*, 38). Wollstonecraft and Hays also draw a parallel between the sexual abuse of female African slaves by white masters and the abuse of white British wives by their husbands. Again there is a problematic element in this too easy analogy which equates the brutality of owner/slave relationships in the colonies with the brutality of middle class English marriages.

How do we account for these analogies and some of the difficulties of interpretation I have suggested? First, as Moria Ferguson has persuasively argued "these female writers displaced certain anxieties about the frequently masked limitations imposed on their own lives" and found in slave societies "an image of tyranny that characterized ... male control over women" (299). Focusing on the emancipation of slaves "enabled them to distance yet circulate negative facts about white women's experiences which they had little license to acknowledge openly, let alone propagandize in public" (299). Their discursive strategy was to create a connection between

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race and gender oppressions that had been kept artificially separate, and to explore and represent dimensions of domestic slavery that traditional abolitionist rhetoric had omitted.

While this description goes some way to explaining the popularity of this figurative use of slavery, we need to remind ourselves of historical events of the period. After February of 1793 and war with France was declared, many in the government and outside specially linked the demands for abolition "in the traffic in slaves with the disastrous obsession with the rights of man which so damaged France" (quote cited by Thomas, 529-530). Any change in the status quo was presented as potentially subversive to public order. Additionally, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Helen Maria Williams were not encouraged or invited to speak at the large Jacobin political rallies in London or Edinburgh nor were there many women members of the Jacobin radical organizations in cities and towns throughout the British Isles. Women's exclusion, which has been carefully documented by Linda Colley and Helen Bruder, suggests that if they were to join the public political debates of the period they had to find another platform: the abolitionist movement, the newly emergent novel reading public, and journalism in the "radical press" (Colley, 250-273; Bruder, 90-132). Thus, for Jacobin women writers the trope of slavery became a way of coding revolutionary political ideology in the commonplaces of the abolitionist movement. Their contact point with the public rhetoric of universal rights was crucially mediated through print, and access to print came outside the Jacobin radical political organizations.

Additionally, the role assigned to middle class women in the iconographic campaign for British nationalism and patriotism during this period put many of the Jacobin women writers in a difficult position. Linda Colley argues that "women were more prominently represented among the ranks of conventional patriots" and often became the embodiment of the patriotic "British family" in Britain in the last decades of the

eighteenth century (Colley, 254). England was home and hearth, while revolutionary France and the home bred Jacobin political agitators were depicted using images of violation and abuse, both of women and the family. Therefore, by focusing on the violation of familial relationships as the fundamental evil of slavery and the slave trade, which became the center of the abolitionist rhetoric from 1790 to 1830, many women writers made themselves into "patriots" and associated slavery with the very imagery used to depict French "traitors" and their followers. Women writers could question existing gender ideologies while subverting them by declaring their support for a more compassionate, reasonable, and patriotic Briton.

Finally, what of other uses of the discourse of slavery? Here I want to use two examples from male writers in the period. The first is from William Godwin's novel *Things As they Are or the Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1793), and the second is from William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794). The Godwin novel uses metaphors and imagery associated with slavery in a commonplace manner; making only one oblique reference to the slave trade (see final pages of Volume Three of the novel). However, the central use of the figurative language of slavery is reserved for Caleb's descriptions of the technologies of power at work in society. First there is in the domestic and legal incarceration exerted by his "enemies" and then there is the tormented secret which makes him "a slave" to Mr. Falkland and his own "curiosity" or desire for knowledge. Finally, slavery is used as a metaphor for the entire system of ideological and social political control in the 1790s. Reasonableness, virtue, and justice are only possible outside the "slavery" of contemporary hierarchical relationships and institutional authority. In the next year, William Blake also used the trope of slavery to describe an hegemonic ideology in his poem "London".

I wander thro' each charter'd street
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow

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And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear:

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldier's sigh,
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born Infant's tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

(Blake, 53)

As E.P. Thompson suggests, Tom Paine or the average supporter of the London Corresponding Society would not have written "mind-forged manacles" since they would have seen the manacles as wholly exterior, "imposed by oppressive priestcraft or kingcraft" (Thompson, 184). This is how Blake saw it in his first draft of the poem in which he wrote "German forg'd links" with specific reference to the Hanoverian monarchy and his fear of Hanoverian troops being used against British Jacobin agitators (Blake, 176-77). In the revised version of the poem "London," slavery is self-induced and is stronger than any iron links of German manufacture; binding the minds not only of the oppressors but of the oppressed. Blake, like other writers of the 1790s, attacks enslavement to "bans" of Church and State, but also suggests that a cohesive "charting" of desire can lead to self-punishment and repression. Throughout the first stanza of the revised poem the word "charter'd" refers to a "charter" in the commercial or legal sense. These documents granted certain rights but which

also limited the rights for others but "charter'd" could also refer to mapping or confining, as in the case of "charting" the river Thames within its banks. It is important that we remind ourselves how often in Blake's poems he uses the metaphor of the mind "fettered by invisible chains" or "charter'd" by ideology. For example, here in a manuscript fragment is the figurative use of enslavement, both imposed from without and also suggesting self-deceit:

Love to faults is always blind
Always is to joy inclined
Lawless wingd & unconfind
And breaks all chains from every mind

Deceit to secrecy confind
Lawful cautious & refind
To every thing but interest blind
And forges fetters for the mind

(Blake, 190)

There is more to this poem and to this story, but that is the stuff of another lecture. In this other narrative, the figurative use of slavery would mark a whole set of metaphoric acts of resistance: the breaking of chains, the snapping of constraints, or the act of "running from their fetters reddening". But today we have seen that writers in the late eighteenth century used the discourses of the sentimental novel and the abolitionist movement to discuss the ideological construction of gender, marriage, property rights, and even political power within British society. For women writers, most of their texts display a too easy equation between the enslavement of African slaves and attendant degradation of British "womanhood". The discourses about slavery within Britain and its colonies could be used to explore/represent aspects of the domestic experience for women, and abolitionist rhetoric could be made to encode the psychological consequences of "enslavement" or a radical political ideology. Additionally, I have suggested there are

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reasons for this based upon emancipationist rhetoric and the historical position of women within the abolitionist movement as they attempted to create a coalition between radical political demands and patriotic sentiments during the war with France. Finally for Godwin and Blake slavery is the epitome of any powerful social and political ideology, created by social and political institutions but effecting the individual in such a way that he or she is contained by and constrained within the dominant discourses of the period.

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