

By our blood in Afric wasted
 'Ere our necks received the chain,
 By the mis'ries that we tasted
 Crossing in your barks" the main,"
 45 By our sufferings since ye brought us
 To the man-degrading mart,
 All sustain'd with patience taught us
 Only by a broken heart—

Deem our nation Brutes no longer
 50 'Till some reason ye shall find
 Worthier of regard and stronger
 Than the Colour of our Kind.
 Slaves of Gold! Whose sordid dealings
 Tarnish all your boasted pow'rs
 55 Prove that *You* have Human Feelings
 'Ere ye proudly question *Ours*.

1788

OLAUDAH EQUIANO

“Written by Himself”: the words concluding the title given to Equiano’s 1789 memoir themselves make a statement about this African’s literacy and membership in the community of rational argumentation. “The life of an African written by himself is certainly a curiosity,” wrote Mary Wollstonecraft in her review, “as it has been a favourite philosophic whim to degrade the numerous nations, on whom the sun-beams more directly dart, . . . and hastily to conclude that nature . . . designed to stamp them with a mark of slavery.” “Written by Himself” also encapsulates the challenge that his *Narrative* posed not only to British racism but also to the iconography of African passivity elaborated in many abolitionist writings. These tended to picture the slave trade’s black victims as recipients either of white people’s malice or their mercy: in this iconography suicide was blacks’ only self-assertive act.

Recent archival discoveries indicate that Equiano (ca. 1745–1797) must at some moments in his life have told people that he had been born in South Carolina. However, many scholars continue to accept the account of his upbringing he gives within his memoir. There he identifies himself as an African by birth and explains how his idyllic childhood in what is now modern Nigeria was brought to a traumatic end when he was kidnapped by slave-traders. He was shipped first to Barbados and then to North America, ending up the property of a British naval officer. He remained six years in the service of Michael Pascal, obtaining some informal education and undergoing Christian baptism. In 1763 Pascal abruptly sold him, despite previously encouraging the young man in the belief that his service had already won him his liberty. Eventually, in 1766, the Quaker who was Equiano’s next purchaser permitted him to buy his freedom. The price was £40, money that Equiano earned through the skilful trading he did on the side while laboring on this master’s ships. As a free-man Equiano exercised many trades before turning author: hairdresser, seaman aboard a polar expedition, even overseer on a Central American plantation founded

ships / ocean

1789

upon slave labor. After his return to London in 1779 he both became involved in Clarkson’s Committee and made allies among the working class membership of the radical London Corresponding Society. He spent the final years of his life lecturing to promote abolition and his book, which went through multiple editions and brought Equiano the prosperity that enabled him to support in comfort his English wife and their two daughters.

Throughout the *Interesting Narrative*, which is simultaneously a travelogue, an intervention into the abolition debate, and a spiritual autobiography, Equiano constructs the events of his life as a series of providential deliverances. It is part of the complex art of his narrative that, however extensive these debts to God, he comes across, as well, as one of the period’s most resolute self-made men.

// Skip to Chapter 4 //

From The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself

From Chapter 3

[FROM VIRGINIA TO ENGLAND]

We were landed up a river a good way from the sea, about Virginia county, where we saw few or none of our native Africans, and not one soul who could talk to me.¹ I was a few weeks weeding grass, and gathering stones in a plantation; and at last all my companions were distributed different ways, and only myself was left. I was now exceedingly miserable, and thought myself worse off than any of the rest of my companions; for they could talk to each other, but I had no person to speak to that I could understand. In this state I was constantly grieving and pining and wishing for death rather than any thing else. While I was in this plantation the gentleman, to whom I suppose the estate belonged, being unwell, I was one day sent for to his dwelling house to fan him; when I came into the room where he was I was very much affrighted at some things I saw, and the more so as I had seen a black woman slave as I came through the house, who was cooking the dinner, and the poor creature was cruelly loaded with various kinds of iron machines; she had one particularly on her head, which locked her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak; and could not eat nor drink. I was much astonished and shocked at this contrivance, which I afterwards learned was called the iron muzzle. Soon after I had a fan put into my hand, to fan the gentleman while he slept; and so I did indeed with great fear. While he was fast asleep I indulged myself a great deal in looking about the room, which to me appeared very fine and curious. The first object that engaged my attention was a watch which hung on the chimney and was going. I was quite surprised at the noise it made, and was afraid it would tell the gentleman any thing I might do amiss: and when I immediately after observed a picture hanging in the room, which appeared constantly to look at me, I was still more affrighted, having never seen such things as these before. At one time I thought it was something relative to magic; and not seeing it move I thought it might be some way the whites had to keep their great men when they died, and offer

1. We pick up Equiano’s story when, a young boy, having survived the voyage from Africa, he commences his life as a slave on a Virginia plantation.

(For his account of the middle passage, see the excerpts from his *Narrative* in the supplemental ebook.)

now amongst a people who had not their faces scarred, like some of the African nations where I had been, I was very glad I did not let them ornament me in that manner when I was with them. When we arrived at Guernsey, my master placed me to board and lodge with one of his mates, who had a wife and family there; and some months afterwards he went to England, and left me in care of this mate, together with my friend Dick: This mate had a little daughter, aged about five or six years, with whom I used to be much delighted. I had often observed that when her mother washed her face it looked very rosy; but when she washed mine it did not look so: I therefore tried oftentimes myself if I could not by washing make my face of the same colour as my little play-mate (Mary), but it was all in vain; and I now began to be mortified at the difference in our complexions.

* * *

From Chapter 4

[SOLD AGAIN]

I thought now of nothing but being freed, and working for myself, and thereby getting money to enable me to get a good education; for I always had a great desire to be able at least to read and write; and while I was on ship-board I had endeavoured to improve myself in both. While I was in the *Ætna* particularly,¹ the captain's clerk taught me to write, and gave me a smattering of arithmetic as far as the rule of three. There was also one Daniel Queen, about forty years of age, a man very well educated, who messed with me² on board this ship, and he likewise dressed and attended the captain. Fortunately this man soon became very much attached to me, and took very great pains to instruct me in many things. He taught me to shave and dress hair a little, and also to read in the Bible, explaining many passages to me, which I did not comprehend. I was wonderfully surprised to see the laws and rules of my country written almost exactly here; a circumstance which I believe tended to impress our manners and customs more deeply on my memory. I used to tell him of this resemblance; and many a time we have sat up the whole night together at this employment. In short, he was like a father to me; and some even used to call me after his name; they also styled me the black Christian. Indeed I almost loved him with the affection of a son. Many things I have denied myself that he might have them; and when I used to play at marbles or any other game, and won a few halfpence, or got any little money, which I sometimes did, for shaving any one, I used to buy him a little sugar or tobacco, as far as my stock of money would go. He used to say, that he and I never should part; and that, when our ship was paid off, as I was as free as himself or any other man on board, he would instruct me in his business, by which I might gain a good livelihood. This gave me new life and spirits; and my heart burned within me, while I thought the time long till I obtained my freedom. For though my master had not promised it to me, yet, besides the assurances I had received that he had no right to detain me, he

1. Pascal was given command of this Royal Navy ship in 1759, at the height of the Seven Years War with France.

2. "Messed with me": dined together, as a fellow member of the crew.

always treated me with the greatest kindness, and reposed in me an unbounded confidence; he even paid attention to my morals; and would never suffer me to deceive him, or tell lies, of which he used to tell me the consequences; and that if I did so God would not love me; so that, from all this tenderness, I had never once supposed, in all my dreams of freedom, that he would think of detaining me any longer than I wished.

In pursuance of our orders we sailed from Portsmouth for the Thames, and arrived at Deptford³ the 10th of December, where we cast anchor just as it was high water. The ship was up about half an hour, when my master ordered the barge to be manned; and all in an instant, without having before given me the least reason to suspect any thing of the matter, he forced me into the barge; saying, I was going to leave him, but he would take care I should not. I was so struck with the unexpectedness of this proceeding, that for some time I did not make a reply, only I made an offer to go for my books and chest of clothes, but he swore I should not move out of his sight; and if I did he would cut my throat, at the same time taking his hanger.⁴ I began, however, to collect myself; and, plucking up courage, I told him I was free, and he could not by law serve me so. But this only enraged him the more; and he continued to swear, and said he would soon let me know whether he would or not, and at that instant sprang himself into the barge from the ship, to the astonishment and sorrow of all on board. The tide, rather unluckily for me, had just turned downward, so that we quickly fell down the river along with it, till we came among some outward-bound West Indiamen; for he was resolved to put me on board the first vessel he could get to receive me. The boat's crew, who pulled against their will, became quite faint different times, and would have gone ashore; but he would not let them. Some of them strove then to cheer me, and told me he could not sell me, and that they would stand by me, which revived me a little; and I still entertained hopes; for as they pulled along he asked some vessels to receive me, but they could not. But, just as we had got a little below Gravesend, we came alongside of a ship which was going away the next tide for the West Indies; her name was the *Charming Sally*, Captain James Doran; and my master went on board and agreed with him for me; and in a little time I was sent for into the cabin. When I came there Captain Doran asked me if I knew him; I answered that I did not; "Then," said he "you are now my slave." I told him my master could not sell me to him, nor to any one else. "Why," said he, "did not your master buy you?" I confessed he did. "But I have served him," said I, "many years, and he has taken all my wages and prize-money,⁵ for I only got one sixpence during the war; besides this I have been baptized;⁶ and by the laws of the land no man has a right to sell me." And I added, that I had heard a lawyer and others at different times tell my master so. They both then said that those people who told me so were not my friends; but I replied—it was very extraordinary that other people did not know the law as well as they. Upon this Captain Doran said I talked too much English; and if I did not behave

3. Portsmouth: port on England's south coast. Site of the Royal Dockyards, Deptford lies on the Thames River, to the east of the city of London.

4. Short sword.

5. "Prize money": ships captured in naval battles were sold, along with their cargoes, and the money was distributed among the victorious crew

as "prizes."

6. Though it had been formally repudiated in 1729 in a legal opinion issued by England's Attorney-General and Solicitor General, the belief that their baptism as Christians should automatically lead individuals to be released from slavery persisted.

myself well, and he quiet, he had a method on board to make me. I was too well convinced of his power over me to doubt what he said; and my former sufferings in the slaveship presenting themselves to my mind, the recollection of them made me shudder.

* * *

From Chapter 5

[CRUELTY OF THE WEST INDIAN PLANTERS]

On the 13th of February 1763, from the mast-head, we descried our destined island Montserrat; and soon after I beheld those

"Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace
And rest can rarely dwell. Hope never comes
That comes to all, but torture without end
Still urges."¹

At the sight of this land of bondage, a fresh horror ran through all my frame, and chilled me to the heart. My former slavery now rose in dreadful review to my mind, and displayed nothing but misery, stripes, and chains; and, in the first paroxysm of my grief, I called upon God's thunder, and his avenging power, to direct the stroke of death to me, rather than permit me to become a slave, and be sold from lord to lord.

* * *

While I was in Montserrat I knew a negro man, named Emanuel Sankey, who endeavoured to escape from his miserable bondage, by concealing himself on board of a London ship: but fate did not favour the poor oppressed man; for, being discovered when the vessel was under sail, he was delivered up again to his master. This *Christian master* immediately pinned the wretch down to the ground at each wrist and ancle, and then took some sticks of sealing wax, and lighted them, and dropped it all over his back. There was another master who was noted for cruelty; and I believe he had not a slave but what had been cut, and had pieces fairly taken out of the flesh: and, after they had been punished thus, he used to make them get into a long wooden box or case he had for that purpose, in which he shut them up during pleasure. It was just about the height and breadth of a man; and the poor wretches had no room, when in the case, to move.

It was very common in several of the islands, particularly in St. Kitt's, for the slaves to be branded with the initial letters of their master's name; and a load of heavy iron hooks hung about their necks. Indeed on the most trifling occasions they were loaded with chains; and often instruments of torture were added. The iron muzzle, thumb screws, &c. are so well known, as not to need a description, and were sometimes applied for the slightest faults. I have seen a negro beaten till some of his bones were broken, for even letting a pot boil over. Is it surprising that usage like this should drive the poor creatures to despair, and make them seek a refuge in death from those evils which render their lives intolerable—while,

1. From Milton's description of Hell: *Paradise Lost* 1. 65–68, slightly misquoted (where Milton wrote "never," Equiano writes "rarely").

"With shuddering horror pale, and eyes agbass,
They view their lamentable lot, and find
No rest!"

1789

2. Again citing Milton's description of Hell: *Paradise Lost* 2. 616–18.

The merchant to whom, following their arrival in Montserrat, Captain Doran sells Equiano eventually permits him to purchase his freedom.

For Equiano's account of how he obtains that money and gains his liberty, see the concluding excerpt from his narrative in the supplemental ebook.

HANNAH MORE AND EAGLESFIELD SMITH

The complicated publication history of "The Sorrows of Yamba" hints at how the abolitionist cause could yoke together people from divergent backgrounds and with conflicting political views. The poem was long identified as a work by Hannah More (1745–1833), an author who began her career as a playwright, but who in the 1780s, prompted by her growing Evangelicalism and the spiritual counsel of John Newton, turned her formidable energies instead to charity work and didactic and polemical writings. Some of these writings urged moral reformation on fashionable ladies. Others aimed to inculcate habits of piety, industry, and submissiveness in the newly literate poor and to steer them away from the ideas of equality filling books such as Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. "The Sorrows of Yamba" debuted in print as part of the "Cheap Repository," a series of tracts targeting this sector of the reading public that More and her sisters began publishing anonymously in 1795. Philanthropists bought up millions of these tracts, priced at a halfpence or penny each, so as to distribute their "entertaining" yet "useful" stories and ballads in Sunday schools, workhouses, and prisons; an Anglican bishop sent trunkfuls to the West Indies. Romanticist scholar Alan Richardson has discovered, however, that the Cheap Repository version of "The Sorrows" reworks a poem that Scottish author Eaglesfield Smith (ca. 1770–1838) appears to have sent to More in manuscript form and which he subsequently republished in the *Universal Magazine* in 1797, perhaps to reassert his authorship. Little is known about Smith, but another of his poems suggests a sympathy for the French Revolution that More would have deplored. More's far-reaching alterations of Smith's original poem converted a tragedy to a conversion narrative. The missionary who appears at line 81 in time to rescue Yamba from suicide and to redeem the reputation of white Englishmen is her invention.

From The Sorrows of Yamba; or the Negro Woman's Lamentation.

To the Tune of *Hosier's Ghost*.

In St. Lucie's distant isle,¹
Still with Afric's love I burn;
Parted many a thousand mile,
Never, never to return.

1. Saint Lucia, island in the eastern Caribbean Sea, claimed through the 18th century by both Britain and France.