

## The Slave Trade and the Literature of Abolition

Late eighteenth-century Britons prided themselves on how their constitution safeguarded individual liberty. Yet their economy depended increasingly on wealth obtained through the enslavement of others. Members of Parliament and even the missionary arm of the Anglican Church numbered among the absentee owners of Caribbean plantations that exploited the labor of enslaved Africans. The maritime industries of Bristol and Liverpool were heavily involved in procuring this labor supply. Beginning in the seventeenth century, a "triangular trade" had been established, which saw ships sail to the west coast of Africa to buy or kidnap human cargo, voyage across the Atlantic to the New World where those slaves would be sold at a tremendous premium, and then, in the third leg of the triangle, return to Britain carrying the colonial goods that fed Europeans' growing appetites for tobacco, rum, and sugar. By the 1790s more than 40,000 Africans annually were being packed into British slave ships. The mortality rate for these people during the horrific Middle Passage has been estimated at one in six. One-third died within three years of disembarking in the West Indies, from tropical diseases or the mistreatment and sexual abuse meted out to them on the plantations.

Through the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century, those few British people who had considered these evils at all had for the most part rationalized them away. Slavery seemed simply the cost of doing business in the New World, and the West Indian planters' rights to secure possession of their property, even property in persons, appeared beyond challenge. The link between slave labor and the consumer pleasures that defined their daily lives escaped most people's notice. "How little think the giddy and the gay / While sipping o'er the sweets of charming tea, / . . . How oft their lux'ry robs the wretch of rest," lamented one Mary Birkett in her 1789 poem on the slave trade. Whereas across the Atlantic the white settlers of the Southern United States and the white elites of the Sugar Islands were outnumbered and continually anxious, with reason, that the enslaved might revolt and avenge their wrongs, white Britons, by contrast, contrived to enjoy the fruits of slavery without meditating on its costs.

The movement for abolishing the slave trade that was launched in the 1780s challenged that willful ignorance. The abolitionists mobilized the power that the stories and poems they distributed had to break down the boundaries between "out there" and "in here"; they brought distant suffering and violence home. Almost every major poet working in the late eighteenth century wrote for their cause. (For pro-slavery writers, by contrast, prose was overwhelmingly the medium of choice.) In amassing, in an often lurid idiom, a dossier of national crime, this literature changed how the public thought about collective moral responsibility. It also evidenced the power that might accrue to those who harnessed the emergent force of mass literacy.

At its 1787 launch the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Trade in Slaves comprised only a small circle: Thomas Clarkson, most famously, the lawyer Granville Sharp, the Quaker publisher James Phillips, and a few others. Nonetheless, abolitionism fast became a popular movement. That same year, two-thirds of the adult male population of Manchester signed petitions calling on Parliament to investigate the trade. Later 300,000 families pledged to abstain from purchasing Caribbean sugar. Though marginalized by later historians, members of Britain's black community, an impoverished group who at this time numbered about ten to fifteen thousand, also found public voices in the struggle. There were black writers such as Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cuguano and, before them, figures such as James Somerset, the

slave who had the audacity to test white men's law and so force the judiciary to declare outright, in the *Mansfield Judgement* of 1772, that in fact there was no legal basis for slavery on English ground.

It was difficult for these activists to parlay altered public opinion into legislative action. William Wilberforce, the Society's chief representative in Parliament, was consistently outmaneuvered by pro-slavery politicians, who variously dismissed the witnesses he introduced, cited Biblical precedents legitimizing modern slavery, or insisted that, thanks to their owners' benevolent care, West Indian slaves were better off than British laborers. His motions for abolition were repeatedly voted down or allowed to die in committee, defeats bitterly memorialized in Anna Letitia Barbauld's 1791 poem "Epistle to William Wilberforce" (see pp. 46–48). The radical turn that revolutionary activity in France took in the 1790s proved another setback. Pro-slavery agitators seized the opportunity to portray abolition as dangerous to social stability. The petitioning among white British subjects that had occurred in the early stages of the abolitionist campaigning looked different in this altered context: a menacing attempt on the part of the governed to overawe their rightful governors. Then revolution in the French sugar colony of Saint Domingue (modern Haiti), led by former slaves Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Toussaint l'Ouverture, occasioned a new racist demonology: the carnage was decreed as the inevitable consequence of recklessly introducing primitive minds to modern politics' "schemes of perfection."

Nonetheless, subsequent events made apparent the penalties Britain would pay for continued support of colonial slavery. The few British soldiers who survived their tours of duty in the West Indies during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars returned with news of just how resolute an enemy slaves seeking their freedom could be. Napoleon's reintroduction of slavery into the French empire in 1802 enabled supporters of abolition to parry the suggestion that the disruption of this lucrative British industry would aid Britain's commercial rivals: instead they could link support for their cause to the war effort. In 1807 Parliament at last voted for abolition.

Wishfully, Wilberforce, Clarkson, and their associates had proposed that with the ending of the trade, slavery itself would naturally and immediately cease to be. In fact, freedom was long in arriving. It took twenty-six years; another wave of political agitation in England; bloody rebellions in Barbados (1816), Guyana (1823), and Jamaica (1831); and finally, a reform of Parliament that reduced the number of votes controlled by the West Indian interests before an Emancipation Bill was enacted. This 1833 bill liberated 800,000 slaves and earmarked £200,000 in compensation for their owners.

The repertory of vignettes of violence, suffering, and retaliation that anti- and pro-slavery writers developed over the course of this long debate altered the cultural landscape. Its influence is discernible throughout Romantic literature, in the writers' apocalyptic imaginings, explorations of themes of guilt and confession, interest in the workings of pity, and consciousness of how language can fail in the face of atrocity. The texts that follow, documenting the early phase of the abolitionist movement, suggest the variety of the moves writers made to galvanize the attention of the reading public.