

THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY

CONTEXTS

Of the 1750s it was possible for John Newton, the author of the hymn “Amazing Grace,” to write that neither he nor any of his friends had had any notion that “slavery could be considered unlawful and wrong.” By 1807 the tide had turned sufficiently that the British Parliament (through the Slave Trade Act) prohibited British vessels from participating in the trading of humans. And in 1833 (through the Slavery Abolition Act) slavery in all British territory was ended.

What brought about such a vast change in such a relatively short time? In part the answer lies in the history of ideas; the Enlightenment gave birth to concepts of freedom and equality—of human rights which, as they were thought through, were widely recognized to apply to all humans, regardless of gender, regardless of race. But the abolition first of the slave trade and then of slavery itself was also the result of concerted political pressure. Some have identified the birth of the modern political movement and the modern political lobbying in the campaign to abolish slavery. Certainly the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, formed in 1787 and led by Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp, among others, played a hugely important role in acquiring and disseminating information as to the actual conditions endured by slaves, and in pressuring the government to take action. In Parliament, William Wilberforce became the de facto leader of the anti-slavery movement: Wilberforce, the author of *Practical Christianity*, was tireless in his efforts. The Society of Friends (also known as the Quakers) also played a leading role, in that society and independently, in shaping public opinion and pressing for change. And a number of authors—including William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Helen Maria Williams, Anna Letitia Barbauld, and Mary Robinson—lent their voices to the cause.

The legal system too played an important role in the process. In a landmark 1772 case the owner of one James Somerset lost his legal suit to regain ownership of Somerset, who had run away from servitude while in England. Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice ruled that, according to the established principles of English law, everyone in England was free. Proponents of slavery had suggested that villeinage, the state of servitude which had existed under feudalism and which had never been declared illegal, provided sufficient legal precedent. Mansfield decided, however, that no such justification could be deemed to exist under English Common Law. If Parliament wished to legalize slavery in England, that would require specific new legislation. Despite Mansfield’s *caveat* against taking his ruling to apply to British possessions overseas, abolitionists had some reason to feel confident from that point on that the law would eventually support their arguments universally and unequivocally, in Britain’s colonies as well as within Britain itself.



from John Newton, *A Slave Trader's Journal* (1751)

John Newton (1725–1807) first went to sea at the age of ten, sailing with his father, the captain of the vessel. By the age of twenty-eight he had wide experience both of the sea and of the slave trade, and was for the first time commanding a vessel himself. The *Duke of Argyll* left England for Bassa in West Africa (in what is now Guinea Bissau) in 1750, made the “middle passage” from Bassa to Antigua in the West Indies between 22 May and 2 July, and returned to Liverpool with a cargo of sugar, arriving in November. The following excerpts are from Newton’s journal of that voyage. In later life, Newton came to regret deeply his life as a slave trader (which he had given up for health reasons in 1754). He became a Christian minister and wrote that he would have left the slave trade sooner “had I considered it as I now do to be unlawful and wrong. But I never had a scruple upon this head at the time; nor was such a thought ever suggested to me by any friend.” In 1770 Newton wrote the famous hymn “Amazing Grace.” He became a strong advocate for the abolition of the slave trade.

Thursday 16 May

[A] long boat came on board from Grande Bassa. I sent Billinge [the second mate] chiefly to satisfy myself of the state and price of slaves. He says the glut we heard so much of is entirely over, the *Britannia* and *Ranger* having met very few. About Settra Crue there is still plenty (upon the account of a war very probably begun with that view) but extravagantly dear ... He brought me a sample of the prices in a woman slave he bought at Bassa, which upon costing up the goods I find cost 96 bars, and I ordered him to get one upon any terms for that reason. That I might not think he gave more than usual, he brought me a list of goods he saw Saunders pay for a man which amounts to 102 bars, and the farther to leeward the dearer still. I think I have sufficient reason not to go down, for setting aside the cost, the assortments in demand there would ruin me soon.

Tuesday 28 May

Secured the after bulkhead of the men's room, for they had started almost every stantient. Their plot was

exceedingly well laid, and had they been let alone an hour longer, must have occasioned us a good deal of trouble and damage. I have reason to be thankful they did not make attempts upon the coast when we had often 7 or 8 of our best men out of the ship at a time and the rest busy. They still look very gloomy and sullen and have doubtless mischief in their heads if they could find every opportunity to vent it. But I hope (by the Divine Assistance) we are fully able to overawe them now ...

Wednesday 12 June

Got the slaves up this morn. Washed them all with fresh water. They complained so much that was obliged to let them go down again when the rooms were cleaned. Buryed a man slave (No. 84) of a flux, which he has been struggling with near 7 weeks ...

Saturday 22 June

Being pretty warm, got up the men and washed all the slaves with fresh water. I am much afraid of another ravage from the flux, for we have had 8 taken within these few days. Have seen 2 or 3 tropick birds and a few flying fish.

Monday 24 June

Buryed a girl slave (No. 92). In the afternoon while we were off the deck, William Cooney seduced a woman slave down into the room and lay with her brutelike in view of the whole quarter deck, for which I put him in irons.¹ I hope this has been the first affair of the kind on board and I am determind to keep them quiet if possible. If anything happens to the woman I shall impute it to him, for she was big with child. Her number is 83 ...

Friday 28 June

By the favour of Divine Providence made a timely discovery today that the slaves were forming a plot for an insurrection. Surprised 2 of them attempting to get off their irons, and upon farther search in their rooms,

¹ In contrast to Newton, some captains actively encouraged their crew to rape the female slaves, since pregnant slaves could be sold at a higher price; mulatto children were especially highly valued as house servants.

upon the information of 3 of the boys, found some knives, stones, shot, etc., and a cold chissel. Upon enquiry there appeared 8 principally concerned to move in projecting the mischief and 4 boys in supplying them with the above instruments. Put the boys in irons and slightly in the thumbscrews to urge them to a full confession. We have already 36 men out of our small number ...

Friday 5 July

[I]n the morning Mr. Guichard went off with me to view the slaves. When came on shore again, after comparing orders and intelligence, he judged it best for the concern to sell here, if I approved it, without which, he was pleased to say, he would do nothing, tho my letters from the owners referred me wholly to his direction. It seems by all I can learn that this is likely to prove as good a market as any of the neighbouring islands; and as for Jamaica or America, I should be extremely loth to venture so far, for we have had the men slaves so long on board that their patience is just worn out, and I am certain they would drop fast had we another passage to make. Monday is appointed for the sale.

from Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787)

Cugoano had been kidnapped in West Africa and sold into slavery in the West Indies. His owner travelled with him to England in 1772, and he declared himself a free man on English soil following the landmark Somerset case. His *Thoughts and Sentiments* is the first substantial anti-slavery work by a black writer.

But why should total abolition, and an universal emancipation of slaves, and the enfranchisement of all the Black People employed in the culture of the Colonies, taking place as it ought to do, and without any hesitation, or delay for a moment, even though it might have some seeming appearance of loss either to government or to individuals, be feared at all? Their

labour, as freemen, would be as useful in the sugar colonies as any other class of men that could be found; and should it even take place in such a manner that some individuals, at first, would suffer loss as a just reward for their wickedness in slave-dealing, what is that to the happiness and good of doing justice to others; and, I must say, to the great danger, otherwise, that must eventually hang over the whole community? It is certain, that the produce of the labour of slaves, together with all the advantages of the West-India traffic, bring in an immense revenue to government; but let that amount be what it will, there might be as much or more expected from the labour of an equal increase of free people, and without the implication of any guilt attending it, and which, otherwise, must be a greater burden to bear, and more ruinous consequences to be feared from it, than if the whole national debt was to sink at once, and to rest upon the heads of all that might suffer by it. Whereas, if a generous encouragement were to be given to a free people, peaceable among themselves, intelligent and industrious, who by art and labour would improve the most barren situations, and make the most of that which is fruitful; the free and voluntary labour of many, would soon yield to any government, many greater advantages than any thing that slavery can produce. And this should be expected, wherever a Christian government is extended, and the true religion is embraced, that the blessings of liberty should be extended likewise, and that it should diffuse its influences first to fertilize the mind, and then the effects of its benignity would extend, and arise with exuberant blessings and advantages from all its operations. Was this to be the case, every thing would increase and prosper at home and abroad, and ten thousand times greater and greater advantages would arise to the state, and more permanent and solid benefit to individuals from the service of freemen, than ever they can reap, or in any possible way enjoy, by the labour of slaves ...

from Alexander Falconbridge, *Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (1788)

Falconbridge sailed aboard slave trading vessels as a surgeon in the 1780s. The work from which the following excerpts are taken was given wide distribu-

tion by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. In 1789 Falconbridge also testified as to the horrors of the trade before the Parliamentary Committee investigating the issue.

The men negroes, on being brought aboard the ship, are immediately fastened together, two and two, by handcuffs on their wrists, and by irons rivetted on their legs. They are then sent down between the decks, and placed in an apartment partitioned off for that purpose. The women likewise are placed in a separate apartment between decks, but without being ironed. And an adjoining room, on the same deck, is besides appointed for the boys. Thus are they all placed in different apartments.

But at the same time, they are frequently stowed so close, as to admit of no other posture than lying on their sides. Neither will the height between decks, unless directly under the grating, permit them the indulgence of an erect posture; especially where there are platforms, which is generally the case. These platforms are a kind of shelf, about eight or nine feet in breadth, extending from the side of the ship towards the centre. They are placed nearly midway between the decks, at the distance of two or three feet from each deck. Upon these the negroes are stowed in the same manner as they are on the deck underneath.

In each of the apartments are placed three or four large buckets, of a conical form, being near two feet in diameter at the bottom, and only one foot at the top, and in depth about twenty-eight inches; to which, when necessary, the negroes have recourse. It often happens, that those who are placed at a distance from the buckets, in endeavouring to get to them, tumble over their companions, in consequence of their being shackled. These accidents, although unavoidable, are productive of continual quarrels, in which some of them are always bruised. In this distressed situation, unable to proceed, and prevented from getting to the tubs, they desist from the attempt; and, as the necessities of nature are not to be repelled, ease themselves as they lie. This becomes a fresh source of broils and disturbances, and tends to render the condition of the poor captive wretches still more uncomfortable. The nuisance arising from these circumstances, is not unfrequently increased by the tubs

being much too small for the purpose intended, and their being usually emptied but once every day. The rule for doing this, however, varies in different ships, according to the attention paid to the health and convenience of the slaves by the captain ...

The diet of the negroes, while on board, consists chiefly of horse-beans, boiled to the consistence of a pulp; of boiled yams and rice, and sometimes of a small quantity of beef or pork. The latter are frequently taken from the provisions laid in for the sailors. They sometimes make use of a sauce, composed of palm-oil, mixed with flour, water, and pepper, which the sailors call *slabber-sauce*. Yams are the favourite food of the Eboe, or Bight negroes, and rice or corn, of those from the Gold and Windward Coasts; each preferring the produce of their native soil ...

They are commonly fed twice a day, about eight o'clock in the morning and four in the afternoon. In most ships they are only fed with their *own food* once a day. Their food is served up to them in tubs, about the size of a small water bucket. They are placed round these tubs in companies of ten to each tub, out of which they feed themselves with wooden spoons. These they soon lose, and when they are not allowed others, they feed themselves with their hands. In favourable weather they are fed upon deck, but in bad weather their food is given them below. Numberless quarrels take place among them during their meals; more especially when they are put upon short allowance ... Their allowance of water is about half a pint each at every meal. It is handed round in a bucket, and given to each negroe in a pannel; a small utensil with a strait handle, somewhat similar to a sauce-boat ...

Upon the negroes refusing to take sustenance, I have seen coals of fire, glowing hot, put on a shovel, and placed so near their lips, as to scorch and burn them. And this has been accompanied with threats, of forcing them to swallow the coals, if they any longer persisted in refusing to eat. These means have generally had the desired effect. I have also been credibly informed, that a certain captain in the slave trade, poured melted lead on such of the negroes as obstinately refused their food.

Exercise being deemed necessary for the preservation of their health, they are sometimes obliged to dance, when the weather will permit their coming on deck. If

they go about it reluctantly, or do not move with agility, they are flogged; a person standing by them all the time with a cat-o'-nine-tails¹ in his hand for that purpose. Their musick, upon these occasions consists of a drum, sometimes with only one head; and when that is worn out, they do not scruple to make use of the bottom of one of the tubs before described. The poor wretches are frequently compelled to sing also; but when they do so, their songs are generally, as may naturally be expected, melancholy lamentations of their exile from their native country ...

On board some ships, the common sailors are allowed to have intercourse with such of the black women whose consent they can procure. And some of them have been known to take the inconstancy of their paramours so much to heart, as to leap overboard and drown themselves. The officers are permitted to indulge their passions among them at pleasure, and sometimes are guilty of such brutal excesses, as disgrace human nature.

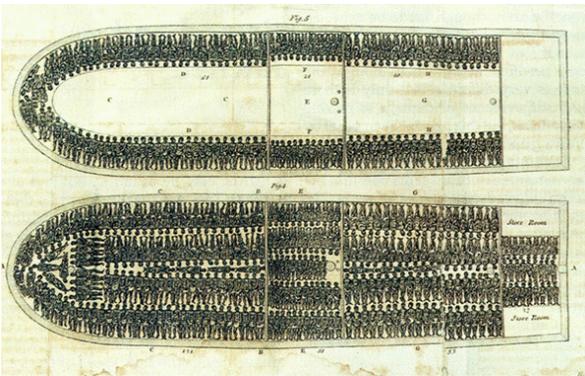


Diagram showing allotment of space for slaves on two decks of a late eighteenth-century sailing ship.

William Cowper, *Sweet Meat has Sour Sauce or, The Slave-Trader in the Dumps*² (1788)

A trader I am to the African shore,
 But since that my trading is like to be o'er,
 I'll sing you a song that you ne'er heard before,
 Which nobody can deny, deny,
 Which nobody can deny.

When I first heard the news it gave me a shock,
 Much like what they call an electrical knock,
 And now I am going to sell off my stock,
 Which nobody, &c.

'Tis a curious assortment of dainty regales,
 To tickle the negroes with when the ship sails,
 Fine chains for the neck, and a cat with nine tails,
 Which nobody, &c.

Here's supple-jack plenty, and store of rat-tan,³
 That will wind itself round the sides of a man,
 As close as a hoop round a bucket or can,
 Which nobody, &c.

Here's padlocks and bolts, and screws for the thumbs,
 That squeeze them so lovingly till the blood comes,
 They sweeten the temper like comfits or plums,⁴
 Which nobody, &c.

When a negro his head from his victuals withdraws,
 And clenches his teeth and thrusts out his paws,
 Here's a notable engine to open his jaws,
 Which nobody, &c.

Thus going to market, we kindly prepare
 A pretty black cargo of African ware,

² The poem is one of several anti-slavery poems by Cowper. The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade distributed his ballad "The Negro's Complaint" widely; both that poem and this were set to music and sung as well as read.

³ *supple-jack* Climbing vine; *rat-tan* Palm stem. Both supple-jack and rattan were used for switches or canes.

⁴ *comfits or plums* Sweetmeats; sugarplums: fruits preserved with sugar.

¹ *cat-o'-nine-tails* Switch with nine ropes attached, used as a beating implement.

30 For what they must meet with when they get there,
Which nobody, &c.

'Twould do your heart good to see 'em below
Lie flat on their backs all the way as we go,
Like sprats on a gridiron,¹ scores in a row,
Which nobody, &c.

35 But ah! if in vain I have studied an art
So gainful to me, all boasting apart,
I think it will break my compassionate heart,
Which nobody, &c.

40 For oh! how it enters my soul like an awl!²
This pity, which some people self-pity call,
Is sure the most heart-piercing pity of all,
Which nobody, &c.

So this is my song, as I told you before;
Come buy off my stock, for I must no more
45 Carry Caesars and Pompeys³ to Sugar-cane shore,
Which nobody can deny, deny,
Which nobody can deny.

from William Wilberforce, "Speech to the House of
Commons," 13 May 1789

William Wilberforce began his long struggle to have the British Parliament abolish the slave trade with the speech excerpted below. In April of 1791, a bill put forward by Wilberforce was voted down by 163 votes to 88; not until 1807 were his efforts on this score successful. News of the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act reached Wilberforce on his deathbed in 1833.

A report has been made by his Majesty's Privy Council, which, I trust, every Gentleman has read, and which ascertains the Slave Trade to be just such in practice as we know, from theory, that it must be. What should we suppose must naturally be the consequence of

¹ *sprats on a gridiron* Small fish on a griddle or broiling-pan.

² *awl* Tool for piercing holes in leather.

³ *Caesars and Pompeys* Names commonly given to African slaves.

our carrying on a Slave Trade with Africa? With a country, vast in its extent, not utterly barbarous, but civilized in a very small degree? Does any one suppose a Slave Trade would *help* their civilization? That Africa would *profit* by such an intercourse? Is it not plain, that she must *suffer* from it? That civilization must be checked; that her barbarous manners must be made more barbarous; and that the happiness of her millions of inhabitants must be prejudiced by her intercourse with Britain? Does not every one see, that a Slave Trade, carried on around her coasts, must carry violence and desolation to her very centre? That, in a Continent, just emerging from barbarism, if a Trade in Men is established—if her men are all converted into goods, and become commodities that can be bartered, it follows, they must be subject to ravage just as goods are; and this too, at a period of civilization, when there is no protecting Legislature to defend this their only sort of property, in the same manner as the rights of property are maintained by the legislature of every civilized country.

We see then, in the nature of things, how easily all the practices of Africa are to be accounted for. Her kings are never compelled to war, that we can hear of, by public principles,—by national glory—still less by the love of their people. In Europe it is the extension of commerce, the maintenance of national honor, or some great public object, that is ever the motive to war with every monarch; but, in Africa, it is the personal *avarice* and *sensuality* of their kings: these two vices of avarice and sensuality, (the most powerful and predominant in natures thus corrupt) we tempt, we stimulate in all these African Princes, and we depend upon these vices for the very maintenance of the Slave Trade ...

Sir, the nature and all the circumstances of this trade are now laid open to us; we can no longer plead ignorance,—we cannot evade it,—it is now an object placed before us,—we cannot pass it; we may spurn it, we may kick it out of our way, but we cannot turn aside so as to avoid seeing it; for it is brought now so directly before our eyes, that this House must decide, and must justify to all the world, and to their own consciences, the rectitude of the grounds and principles of their decision.

A Society [the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade] has been established for the abolition of this trade, [in 1787] in which Dissenters, Quakers,

Churchmen—in which the most conscientious of all persuasions have all united, and made a common cause in this great question. Let not Parliament be the only body that is insensible to the principles of national justice. Let us make reparation to Africa, so far as we can, by establishing a trade upon true commercial principles, and we shall soon find the rectitude of our conduct rewarded, by the benefits of a regular and a growing commerce.

Proponents of Slavery

It is often (and rightly) pointed out that appeals to Christian virtue were central to the abolitionist cause. As some of the following excerpts illustrate, appeals to Christian principles were also made on the other side of the argument—as were appeals of a variety of other sorts.

from Rev. Robert Boncher Nicholls, *Observations, Occasioned by the Attempts Made in England to Effect the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (1788)

[The author] thought it incumbent on him first to search the scriptures, to learn whether slavery was inconsistent with the revealed will of the Deity. The result of his enquiry was perfectly satisfactory to himself, and he thought it but right to point out some few of the many passages, to be found in the sacred volumes, which justify that commerce. Since the following observations went to the press the author has the great satisfaction to find, that he might have pursued his original plan without any injury to the cause he has endeavoured to support, as he has seen a pamphlet by the Rev. Mr. Harris, of Liverpool, who has so clearly proved, from the scriptures, that slavery is neither contrary to the law nor gospel, that it is scarcely possible for the most conscientious believer, who reads that tract, to doubt in future; whether the man servant or the maid servant is not as much a man's property as "*his ox or his ass, or any thing that is his.*" ...

About the time of Lord Mansfield's determination in the case of Mr. Stuart's negro, [those in England who were attended by slaves] ... had every right to suppose

they were authorised, by the laws of Great Britain, as well as those of the colonies, to consider those people as their property; and that they had a right to their services in Europe, or to send, or accompany them back to the colonies, as they judged proper: They found themselves mistaken, and that it was permitted to debauch their slaves, to encourage or entice them to run away, with impunity. The ideas of liberty, the charms of novelty, and an ignorance of the country they had got to; where they found themselves upon a perfect equality, at least, with the inferior white people, could not fail of having pernicious effects upon their minds, and great numbers ran away from their masters. They in general plunged into vice and debauchery, and many of them, who were desirous of returning to their masters and mistresses, were refused to be received. The whole of those thus lost to their owners, and as to every useful purpose, to the community, cannot have been less in number than from 15,000 to 20,000.—As most of them were prime, young seasoned, or Creole slaves, the loss to their owners, the planters, have not been less than from 1,000,000 to 1,200,000 sterling. A large sum to be sacrificed, to the mere names of *liberty and humanity!* What has been the result of thus extending *the blessings of liberty* to so many *wretched slaves*. Let any body shew scarce a single instance of any one of these people being in so happy a situation as they were before. The greater part, it is known, died miserably, in a very short time. No parish was willing to receive them, so that the survivors, after begging about the streets of London, and suffering all those evils, and inconveniencies, consequent on idleness and poverty, famine, disease, and the inclemency of the weather; attracted the attention of the public, and government was prevailed upon to undertake the transportation of them to the country from whence they or their ancestors had been ravished *by the wicked traders* of London, Liverpool, and Bristol.

Equal unhappiness would be the lot of the slaves in the islands, if they were set free; what could they do to obtain a livelihood? To suppose they would hire themselves out to work, can only enter into the imagination of those who do not know the people, or the country: What has so lately passed in England is surely sufficient to shew that there can be no idea, they will, any of them, wish to return to their own country. Thousands

of negroes have been made free by their masters in the colonies, and it may, with truth, be asserted, that, notwithstanding many of them were very capable of paying for a passage to any part of Africa they thought proper; scarce a single instance can be produced of any one of them desiring to return to the place of his nativity.

The present attempt to cram liberty down the throats of people who are incapable of digesting it, can with propriety, be resembled to nothing, so well as to the account of poor Gulliver, when he was carried out of his little cabinet to the top of the house, by the Brobdignag Monkey.

from Anonymous, *Thoughts on the Slavery of Negroes, as it Affects the British Colonies in the West Indies: Humbly Submitted to the Consideration of Both Houses of Parliament* (1788)

If I am able to shew that the blacks are really happy; that their condition (if the odious name of slave could be forgotten) is preferable to the lower orders of the people in Great Britain and Ireland; and that they enjoy the necessaries, and often the luxuries of life, I trust every honest man will feel a just indignation at any attempt to mislead his judgment, and to impose upon him an opinion of cruelty, which has no existence in any of the British West India islands. ...

Let us take a view of the situation of the Africans, the nature of their country, their climate and government, and the genius and disposition of its inhabitants. The appearance of the slave-coast of Africa, when it was first visited by the Europeans, strongly marked the barbarous state of the people; a rude, inhospitable country, susceptible indeed of cultivation, but almost every way covered with thick, impenetrable forests. The wild luxuriance of nature was here portrayed in rich attire. The pruning hand of man was hardly seen. The peaceful labours of agriculture were little known.

It has been observed, that those countries most favoured by nature, often make the slowest progress to civilization; and that the people always groan under the weight of a cruel despotism. "This is an effect which springs from a natural cause. Great heat enervates the

strength and courage of men, while in cold climates they have a certain vigour of body and mind, which renders them capable of long, painful, great, and intrepid actions. We ought not, then, to be astonished, that the effeminacy of the people in hot climates has almost always rendered them slaves; and that the bravery of those in colder regions has enabled them to maintain their liberties."

In those countries between the tropics, and especially under the equator, "the excess of heat renders men so slothful and dispirited, that nothing but the most pressing necessity can induce them to perform any laborious duty." An unconquerable indolence is universally felt and acknowledged. Sunk into the most deplorable degeneracy, they feel no incitements beyond the present moment. In vain may we represent to them the happiness of others. In vain may we attempt to rouse them to a sense of their own weakness. The soul, unwilling to enlarge itself, becomes the prey of every ignoble passion. Strangers to every virtuous and magnanimous sentiment, they are without fame—they are without glory.

The Africans have been always represented as a cruel and perfidious people, lazy, lascivious, faithless in their engagements, innate thieves, without morals, and without any just notion of any one religious duty. Their laws are founded on such principles as naturally flow from so impure a source. The government of the slave-coast of Africa is despotic. The will of the Prince must be obeyed. There is no appeal upon earth from his awful decree. The lives and fortunes of every one are absolutely at his disposal. These tyrants have thought fit to distinguish a number of crimes, but have taken no care to proportionate their degrees of punishment. Every offence is there punished with loss of life or liberty. Captives in war are deliberately murdered, or sold as slaves, as may most indulge the sanguinary caprice of the conqueror. Those convicted of adultery or theft, lose their liberty. He who is in debt, and unable to pay must either sell himself or his children to satisfy the creditor. It may be said, that the loss of life, or liberty, only commences with the injury done to society. I answer, "that in Africa, the civil liberty is already destroyed by the political slavery." A country like this, doomed to bear the weight of human misery, will always present a

history of the most shocking cruelties, and of the severest slavery upon earth.

After viewing this melancholy picture, we ought not to be surprised at the extent of the present intercourse between the Africans and Europeans. For want of proper consideration, and from the influence of certain prejudices, the slave-trade has long been considered the scandal and reproach of every nation who have been anyway engaged in it, but without sufficient reason.

Men who enjoy the benefits of civilization, and who are protected in life, liberty, and property, by the wisdom of humane and equal laws, feel that spirit of liberty, and enthusiastic love of their country, which freedom only can inspire. Talk to them of banishment, and it is more terrible than death. Not so the poor African—he has few motives for wishing any longer to behold the distresses of his country; he is, alas! perhaps, the last witness of the sad misfortunes of his house—Already deprived of family, friends, and every other tender endearment, he has no relief but in banishment or death.

It is pleasant to mark the progress of the barbarian, from the moment he is put on shore in an English colony, to the time he becomes the master of a family, and acquires property of his own. He is first of all clothed (a thing unknown to him in his own country) and then instructed in the necessity of cleanliness. When carried to the plantation, he is shewn how to work in common with others. In a little time he chooses himself a wife, and has a house given to him, much better, allowing for the difference of climate, than what the peasants have in this country. When he is sufficiently instructed in the management of ground, a certain portion is allotted to the exclusive use of himself and family, which, with a moderate share of industry, is not only sufficient to supply every personal want, but leave a considerable part to be sent to market, to be sold, or exchanged for either necessaries or luxuries. The African now, finding himself a family man, and in possession of house and land, he begins to rear hogs, poultry, and other small stock, and either sells them to his master at a fair price, or carries them to market, for which one day in the week is allowed him. ...

The African, no longer remembering a country to which he owes nothing but birth, becomes attached to

the soil which is so propitious to his wants, and having few cares, and few desires, that are not completely satisfied, there is nothing so terrible to him as a change of situation. The master is the steward, the faithful guardian of all his wants and necessities. In sickness and in health—in youth and in old age, his assiduities are undiminished. The reader will anticipate the happiness of these people—and happy they must be, while their labours are directed by equity and humanity, and not by avarice.

God forbid that I should be an advocate for slavery, or servitude of any description, that can anyway limit the extent of human happiness: at the same time let me caution my countrymen against the weakness and folly of believing that happiness can only be sought in a constitution as free as their own. The history of all nations shew how extremely improper the laws of one country would be for those of another.

from Gordon Turnbull, *An Apology of Negro Slavery; or, the West India Planters Vindicated from the Charge of Inhumanity* (1786)

As a contrast to the horrid and fictitious picture, which has been drawn of the state of the negroes in the West-Indies, I shall here exhibit a true and more pleasing representation, taken from the life.

To begin then with the period of the Guinea negroe's arrival in one of the islands.—As soon as the ship that brings them is at anchor, the master or surgeon goes on shore to procure fresh provisions, fruit, and vegetables of all kinds, which are immediately sent on board for the slaves. Parties of them are sent on shore at different times, and conducted a little way into the country, where they frequently meet with many natives of their own country, who speak the same language, and sometimes with near and dear relations, who all appear very cheerful and happy. These agreeable and unexpected meetings are truly affecting, and excite the most tender and pleasing sensations in the breasts of the bystanders. It is not uncommon for these newly arrived guests, to mingle in the dance, or to join in the song, with their country people. If any of them appear dull or desponding, the old negroes endeavour to enliven them, by the most soothing and endearing expressions, telling

them, in their own tongue, not to be afraid of the white men; that the white men are very good; that they will get plenty of *yam, yam*, (their general name for victuals) and that their work will be of the easiest kind. By these means, they are perfectly reconciled to the white men, and to a change of country, and of situation, which many of them declare, to be far superior to that which they had quitted. When the day of sale arrives, they not only meet the planter's looks, and answer his enquiries, by means of an interpreter, with great firmness, but they try, by offering their stout limbs to his inspection, jumping to shew their activity, and other allurements, to induce those, whose appearance pleases them, to buy them, and to engage, if possible, a preference in their favour ...

As soon as the new negroes are brought home to the plantation, if a planter has purchased them they are properly clothed.—A sufficient quantity of wholesome food is prepared, and served to them three times a day. They are comfortably lodged in some room of the manager's own house, or in some other convenient place, where they can be immediately under his eye for a few days. During this time they are not put to any kind of labour whatever, but are regularly conducted to bathe in the river, or in the sea, if it is nigh, twice a day. In the evenings they sing and dance, after the manner of their own nation, together with the old negroes who happen to be from the same country, one or two of whom are commonly instrumental performers, in these very noisy, but very joyous assemblies. In a very short time, they are taken into the houses of the principal and best disposed negroes, who adopt one of two of these new subjects into each family, to assist them in all the little domestic offices of cookery, carrying water, wood, &c. This is almost the only work they are employed in for the first two or three months, at the expiration of which, they are put to the easiest kind of labour for some months more ...

from Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790)

Wollstonecraft's more famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, was published two years

after her much shorter work on the rights of men, which briefly discusses the issue of slavery.

It is necessary to repeat, that there are rights which we received, at our birth, as men, when we were raised above the brute creation by the power of improving ourselves—and that we receive these not from our forefathers, but from God?

My father may dissipate his property, yet I have no right to complain;—but if he should attempt to sell me for a slave, or fetter me with laws contrary to reason; nature, in enabling me to discern good from evil, teaches me to break the ignoble chain ...

But on what principle Mr. Burke¹ could defend American independence, I cannot conceive; for the whole tenor of his ... arguments settles slavery on an everlasting foundation. Allowing his servile reverence for antiquity, and prudent attention to self-interest, to have the force which he insists on, it ought never to be abolished; and, because our ignorant forefathers, not understanding the native dignity of man, sanctioned a traffic that outrages every suggestion of reason and religion, we are to submit to the inhuman custom, and term an atrocious insult to humanity the love of our country and a proper submission to those laws which secure our property.—Security of property! Behold, in a few words, the definition of English liberty. And to this selfish principle every nobler one is sacrificed. ...

Anna Laetitia Barbault, "Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. on the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade" (1791)²

Cease, Wilberforce, to urge thy generous aim!
Thy country knows the sin, and stands the shame!
The preacher, poet, senator in vain
Has rattled in her sight the Negro's chain;
5 With his deep groans assailed her startled ear,

¹ *Mr. Burke* Edmund Burke (1729–97), Anglo-Irish statesman, author, and philosopher. Burke famously supported the right of the colonies to self-rule.

² *William Wilberforce ... Slave Trade* This poem appeared shortly after the bill put forward by Wilberforce (and supported both by the Prime Minister, William Pitt, and the leader of the Opposition, Charles Fox), and was defeated by a vote of 163 to 88.

And rent the veil that hid his constant tear;
 Forced her averted eyes his stripes¹ to scan,
 Beneath the bloody scourge laid bare the man,
 Claimed Pity's tear, urged Conscience's strong control,
 10 And flashed conviction on her shrinking soul.
 The Muse² too, soon awaked, with ready tongue
 At Mercy's shrine applausive paeans rung;
 And Freedom's eager sons, in vain foretold
 A new Astraean³ reign, an age of gold:
 15 She knows and she persists—Still Afric bleeds,
 Unchecked, the human traffic still proceeds;
 She stamps her infamy to future time,
 And on her hardened forehead seals the crime.
 In vain, to thy white standard⁴ gathering round,
 20 Wit, Worth, and Parts^o and Eloquence *intelligence*
 are found:
 In vain, to push to birth thy great design,
 Contending chiefs, and hostile virtues join;
 All, from conflicting ranks, of power possess
 To rouse, to melt, or to inform the breast.
 25 Where seasoned tools of Avarice prevail,
 A nation's eloquence, combined, must fail:
 Each flimsy sophistry by turns they try;
 The plausible^o argument, the daring lie, *plausible*
 The artful gloss,^o that moral sense confounds, *explanation*
 30 Th'acknowledged thirst of gain that honour wounds:
 Bane of ingenuous minds, th'unfeeling sneer,
 Which, sudden, turns to stone the falling tear:
 They search assiduous, with inverted skill,
 For forms of wrong, and precedents of ill;
 35 With impious mockery wrest the sacred page,
 And glean up crimes from each remoter age:
 Wrung Nature's tortures, shuddering, while you tell,
 From scoffing fiends bursts forth the laugh of hell;
 In Britain's senate, Misery's pangs give birth
 40 To jests unseemly, and to horrid mirth—⁵
 Forbear!—thy virtues but provoke our doom,
 And swell th'account of vengeance yet to come;

¹ *stripes* Open wounds caused by the lash.

² *Muse* One of the nine goddesses of arts and sciences.

³ *Astraea* Greek goddess of justice.

⁴ *standard* Flag.

⁵ *To jests . . . mirth* Barbauld refers to some Members of Parliament who laughed in the House of Commons upon hearing of the suffering of slaves.

For, not unmarked in Heaven's impartial plan,
 Shall man, proud worm, condemn his fellow man?
 45 And injured Afric, by herself redrest,
 Darts her own serpents at her tyrant's breast.
 Each vice, to minds depraved by bondage known,
 With sure contagion fastens on his own;
 In sickly languors melts his nerveless frame,
 50 And blows to rage impetuous Passion's flame:
 Fermenting swift, the fiery venom gains
 The milky innocence of infant veins;
 There swells the stubborn will, damps learning's fire,
 The whirlwind wakes of uncontrolled desire,
 55 Sears the young heart to images of woe,
 And blasts the buds of Virtue as they blow.
 Lo! where reclined, pale Beauty courts the breeze,
 Diffused on sofas of voluptuous ease;
 With anxious awe, her menial train around,
 60 Catch her faint whispers of half-uttered sound;
 See her, in monstrous fellowship, unite
 At once the Scythian, and the Sybarite;⁶
 Blending repugnant vices, misallied,
 Which *frugal* nature purposed to divide;
 65 See her, with indolence to fierceness joined,
 Of body delicate, infirm of mind,
 With languid tones imperious mandates urge;
 With arm recumbent wield the household scourge;
 And with unruffled mien,^o and placid sounds, *appearance*
 70 Contriving torture, and inflicting wounds.
 Nor, in their palmy walks and spicy groves,
 The form benign of rural pleasure roves;
 No milkmaid's song, or hum of village talk,
 Soothes the lone poet in his evening walk:
 75 No willing arm the flail unwearied plies,
 Where the mixed sounds of cheerful labour rise;
 No blooming maids, and frolic swains are seen
 To pay gay homage to their harvest queen:
 No heart-expanding scenes their eyes must prove
 80 Of thriving industry, and faithful love:
 But shrieks and yells disturb the balmy air,
 Dumb sullen looks of woe announce despair,
 And angry eyes through dusky features glare.
 Far from the sounding lash the Muses fly,

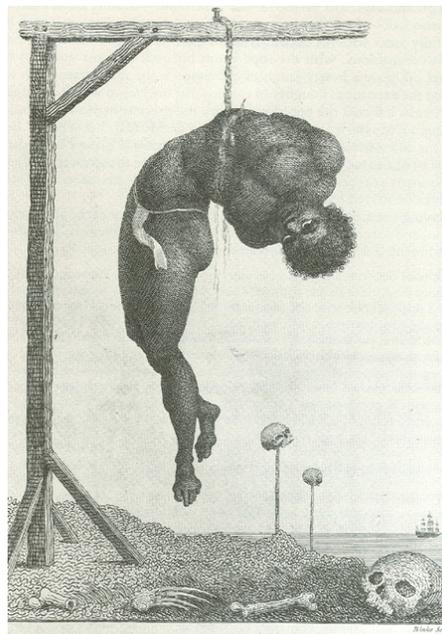
⁶ *Scythian* Ancient nomadic Europeans: synonym for ferocity;
Sybarite People from the ancient Greek city of Sybaris: synonym for pleasure-loving.

85 And sensual riot drowns each finer joy.
 Nor less from the gay East,^o on *India*
 essenced wings,
 Breathing unnamed perfumes, Contagion springs;
 The soft luxurious plague alike pervades
 The marble palaces, and rural shades;
 90 Hence, thronged Augusta^o builds her rosy bowers, *London*
 And decks in summer wreaths her smoky towers;
 And hence, in summer bow'rs, Art's costly hand
 Pours courtly splendours o'er the dazzled land:
 The manners melt—One undistinguished blaze
 95 O'erwhelms the sober pomp of elder days;
 Corruption follows with gigantic stride,
 And scarce vouchsafes his shameless front to hide:
 The spreading leprosy taints ev'ry part,
 Infects each limb, and sickens at the heart.
 100 Simplicity! most dear of rural maids,
 Weeping resigns her violated shades:
 Stern Independence from his glebe^o retires, *field*
 And anxious Freedom eyes her drooping fires;
 By foreign wealth are British morals changed,
 105 And Afric's sons, and India's, smile avenged.
 For you, whose tempered ardour long has borne
 Untired the labour, and unmoved the scorn;
 In Virtue's fasti^o be inscribed your fame, *calendar*
 And uttered yours with Howard's¹ honoured name,
 110 Friends of the friendless—Hail, ye generous band!
 Whose efforts yet arrest Heav'n's lifted hand,
 Around whose steady brows, in union bright,
 The civic wreath, and Christian's palm unite:
 Your merit stands, no greater and no less,
 115 Without, or with the varnish of success;
 But seek no more to break a nation's fall,
 For ye have saved yourselves—and that is all.
 Succeeding times your struggles, and their fate,
 With mingled shame and triumph shall relate,
 120 While faithful History, in her various page,
 Marking the features of this motley age,
 To shed a glory, and to fix a stain,
 Tells how you strove, and that you strove in vain.

¹ *Howard* John Howard (1726–90), prison reformer and philanthropist.

William Blake, Images of Slavery

The engravings reproduced below are among sixteen plates prepared by William Blake in 1792–93 as illustrations for John Stedman's *Narrative of Five Year's Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796)



from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Slave Trade* (1796)

The article from which this excerpt is taken was delivered as a lecture in 1795, and published in Coleridge's magazine *The Watchman* the following year.

I have dwelt anxiously on this subject, with a particular view, to the Slave-trade, which, I knew, has insinuated in the minds of many, uneasy doubts respecting the existence of a beneficent Deity. And indeed the evils arising from the formation of *imaginary* Wants, have in no instance been so dreadfully exemplified, as in this inhuman Traffic. We receive from the West-India Islands Sugars, Rum, Cotton, Logwood, Cocoa, Coffee, Pimento, Ginger, Indigo, Mahogany, and Conserves. Not one of these articles are necessary; indeed with the exception of Cotton and Mahogany we cannot truly call them even useful: and not one of them is at present attainable by the poor and labouring part of Society. In return we export vast quantities of necessary Tools, Raiment, and defensive Weapons, with great stores of Provision. So that in this Trade as in most others the Poor are employed with unceasing toil first to raise, and then to send away the Comforts, which they themselves absolutely want, in order to procure idle superfluities for their Masters. If this Trade had never existed, no one human being would have been less comfortably clothed, housed, or nourished. Such is its value—they who would estimate the price which we pay for it, may consult the evidence delivered before the House of Commons.

from William Earle, *Obi; or, the History of Three-Fingered Jack* (1800)

Earle's novel is set against the background of a slave rebellion in Jamaica; it is based on the true story of Jack Mansong, an escaped slave who was said to have gained strength to lead the rebellion from the religion of "obeah," or "obi." The epistolary novel is for the most part made up of letters from one George Stanford, "a resident of Jamaica," to Charles, "his friend in England." The excerpt that

appears here is from the letter with which the book opens.

Jack is a noble fellow, and in spite of every cruel hard-hearted planter, I shall repeat the same to the last hour of my life. "Jack is a Negro," say they. "Jack is a MAN," say I.

—"He is a slave."

—"MAN cannot be a slave to MAN."

—"He is my property."

—"How did you acquire that property?"

—"By paying for it."

—"Paying! Paying whom?"

—"Him who brought him from Africa."

—"How did he get possession of him?"

—"He caught him there."

—"Caught! what? Like a wild beast?"

—"No, but he contrived means to convey him into his ship?"

—"Contrived! Then he brought him without his consent?"

—"Very likely."

—"And what is become of that robber?"

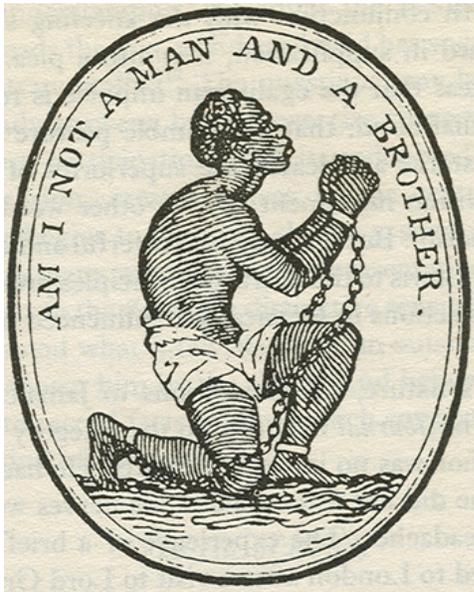
—"Robber! He is a very respectable man, who has left off trade, has married the daughter of a rich planter, and now lives very comfortably, after the fatigues of an industrious life."

—"What! Do they hang a poor hard-labouring man, who, driven by despair at the sight of his numerous family ready to starve for want of a bit of bread, takes advantage of a dark night, goes on the highway and frightens the traveller out of a few pieces of gold, and shall a daring ruffian, who is openly guilty of a crime more heinous in its nature and baneful in its effects, get respected by every body and pass his days in the peaceable enjoyment of riches acquired by such infamous means?"

—"I don't understand you; I never heard that the traffic was infamous. Is it not authorised by all the nations of Europe, Asia and America? Have not regulations been made concerning it by all governments?"

—"Very true, but that does not make it more honorable."

—1800



Anti-slavery woodcut c. 1790s

Mary Robinson, *Poems on Slavery* (1798, 1800)

Robinson, one of the best-known writers of the age, published a substantial number of works devoted in whole or in part to anti-slavery themes including “Captivity: A Poem (1777), “The African (1798), and “The Negro Girl” (1800). “The African” was published initially in the *Morning Post*, 2 August 1798 and later incorporated into the long poem *The Progress of Liberty*. “The Negro Girl” appeared in Robinson’s collection of *Lyrical Tales*.

“The African” (1798)

Shall the poor AFRICAN, the passive Slave,
 Born in the bland effulgence of broad day,
 Cherish’d by torrid splendours, while around
 The plains prolific teem with honey’d stores,
 Sink prematurely to a grave obscure,
 No tear to grace his ashes? Or suspire
 To wear Submission’s long and goading chain,
 To drink the tear that down his swarthy cheek
 Flows fast, to moisten his toil-fever’d lip
 Parch’d by the noon-tide blaze? Shall HE endure

The frequent lash, the agonizing scourge,
 The day of labour, and the night of pain;
 Expose his naked limbs to burning gales;
 Faint in the sun, and wither in the storm;
 15 Traverse hot sands, imbibe the morbid breeze,
 Wing’d with contagion; while his blister’d feet,
 Scorch’d by the vertical and raging beam,
 Pour the swift life-stream? Shall his frenzied eyes,
 Oh! worst of mortal miseries! behold
 20 The darling of his heart, his sable love,
 Selected from the trembling timid throng,
 By the wan TYRANT, whose licentious touch
 Seals the dark fiat of the SLAVE’s despair!

OH LIBERTY! From thee the suppliant claims
 25 The meed of retribution! Thy pure flame
 Wou=d light the sense opaque, and warm the spring
 Of boundless ecstasy: while Nature’s laws,
 So violated, plead immortal tongu’d,
 For her dark-fated children! Lead them forth
 30 From bondage infamous! Bid Reason own
 The dignities of MAN, whate’er his clime,
 Estate, or colour. And, O sacred TRUTH!
 Tell the proud Lords of traffic, that the breast
 Thrice ebon-tinted, owns a crimson tide
 35 As pure,—as clear, as Europe’s Sons can boast.

“The Negro Girl” (1800)

I
 Dark was the dawn, and o’er the deep
 The boist’rous whirlwinds blew;
 The Sea-bird wheel’d its circling sweep,
 And all was drear to view—
 5 When on the beach that binds the western shore
 The love-lorn ZELMA stood, list’ning the tempest’s roar.

2
 Her eager Eyes beheld the main,
 While on her DRACO dear
 She madly call’d, but call’d in vain,
 10 No sound could DRACO hear,
 Save the shrill yelling of the fateful blast,
 While ev’ry Seaman’s heart, quick shudder’d as it past.

3

White were the billows, wide display'd
 The clouds were black and low;
 15 The Bittern shriek'd, a gliding shade
 Seem'd o'er the waves to go!
 The livid flash illum'd the clam'rous main,
 While ZELMA pour'd, unmark'd, her melancholy
 strain.

4

"Be still!" she cried, "loud tempest cease!
 20 O! spare the gallant souls:
 The thunder rolls—the winds increase—
 The Sea, like mountains, rolls!
 While, from the deck, the storm-worn victims leap,
 And o'er their struggling limbs, the furious billows
 sweep.

5

O! barb'rous Pow'r! relentless Fate!
 Does Heav'n's high will decree
 That some should sleep on beds of state,—
 Some, in the roaring Sea?
 30 Some, nurs'd in splendour, deal Oppression's blow,
 While worth and DRACO pine—in Slavery and woe!

6

Yon Vessel oft has plough'd the main
 With human traffic fraught;
 Its cargo,—our dark Sons of pain—
 For worldly treasure bought!
 35 What had they done?—O Nature tell me why—
 Is taunting scorn the lot, of thy dark progeny?

7

Thou gav'st, in thy caprice, the Soul
 Peculiarly enshrin'd;
 Nor from the ebon Casket stole
 40 The Jewel of the mind!
 Then wherefore let the suff'ring Negro's breast
 Bow to his fellow, MAN, in brighter colours drest.

8

Is it the dim and glossy hue
 That marks him for despair?—

45 While men with blood their hands embrue,
 And mock the wretch's pray'r?
 Shall guiltless Slaves the Scourge of tyrants feel,
 And, e'en before their GOD! unheard, unpitied kneel.

9

Could the proud rulers of the land
 50 Our Sable race behold;
 Some bow'd by torture's Giant hand
 And others, basely sold!
 Then would they pity Slaves, and cry, with shame,
 Whate'er their TINTS may be, their SOULS are still
 the same!

10

55 Why seek to mock the Ethiop's face?
 Why goad our hapless kind?
 Can features alienate the race—
 Is there no kindred mind?
 Does not the cheek which vaunts the roseate hue
 60 Oft blush for crimes, that Ethiops never knew?

11

Behold! the angry waves conspire
 To check the barb'rous toil!
 While wounded Nature's vengeful ire—
 Roars, round this trembling Isle!
 65 And hark! her voice re-echoes in the wind—
 Man was not form'd by Heav'n, to trample on his kind!

12

Torn from my Mother's aching breast,
 My Tyrant sought my love—
 But, in the Grave shall ZELMA rest,
 70 E'er she will faithless prove—
 No DRACO!—Thy companion I will be
 To that celestial realm, where Negroes shall be free!

13

The Tyrant WHITE MAN taught my mind—
 The letter'd page to trace;—
 75 He taught me in the Soul to find
 No tint, as in the face:
 He bade my Reason, blossom like the tree—
 But fond affection gave, the ripen'd fruits to thee.

14

With jealous rage he mark'd my love;
 He sent thee far away;—
 80 And prison'd in the plantain grove—
 Poor ZELMA pass'd the day—
 But ere the moon rose high above the main,
 ZELMA, and Love contriv'd, to break the Tyrant's
 chain.

15

Swift, o'er the plain of burning Sand
 My course I bent to thee;
 And soon I reach'd the billowy strand
 Which bounds the stormy Sea.—
 DRACO! my Love! Oh yet, thy ZELMA's soul
 90 Springs ardently to thee,—impatient of controul.

16

Again the lightning flashes white—
 The rattling cords among!
 Now, by the transient vivid light,
 I mark the frantic throng!
 95 Now up the tatter'd shrouds my DRACO flies—
 While o'er the plunging prow, the curling billows rise.

17

The topmast falls—three shackled slaves—
 Cling to the Vessel's side!
 Now lost amid the madd'ning waves—
 100 Now on the mast they ride—
 See! on the forecastle my DRACO stands
 And now he waves his chain, now clasps his bleeding
 hands.

18

Why, cruel WHITE-MAN! when away
 My sable Love was torn,
 105 Why did you let poor ZELMA stay,
 On Afric's sands to mourn?
 No! ZELMA is not left, for she will prove
 In the deep troubled main, her fond—her faithful
 LOVE.”

19

The lab'ring Ship was now a wreck,

20

110 The Shrouds were flutt'ring wide!
 The rudder gone, the lofty deck
 Was rock'd from side to side—
 Poor ZELMA's eyes now dropp'd their last big tear,
 While, from her tawny cheek, the blood recoil'd with
 fear.

21

115 Now frantic, on the sands she roam'd,
 Now shrieking stop'd to view
 Where high the liquid mountains foam'd,
 Around the exhausted crew—
 'Till, from the deck, her DRACO's well known form
 120 Sprung mid the yawning waves, and buffeted the
 Storm.

22

Long, on the swelling surge sustain'd
 Brave DRACO sought the shore,
 Watch'd the dark Maid, but ne'er complain'd,
 Then sunk, to gaze no more!
 125 Poor ZELMA saw him buried by the wave—
 And, with her heart's true Love, plung'd in a wat'ry
 grave.

from Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere Journal*

As the following excerpt from Dorothy Wordsworth's journals indicates, brutality on slave ships could also be directed at members of the crew.

Monday Morning [March 15th] We sat reading the poems and I read a little German . . . During W's¹ absence a sailor who was travelling from Liverpool to Whitehaven called. He was faint and pale when he knocked at the door, a young man very well dressed. We sat by the kitchen fire talking with him for 2 hours—he told us most interesting stories of his life. His name was Isaac Chapel—he had been at sea since he was 15 years old. He was by trade a sail-maker. His last voyage was to the coast of Guinea. He had been on board a slave ship the captain's name Maxwell where one man had been killed a boy put to lodge with the pigs & was half eaten,

¹ W's: William Wordsworth's.

one boy set to watch in the hot sun till he dropped down dead. He had been cast away in North America and had travelled 30 days among the Indians where he had been well treated. He had twice swum from a king's ship in the night & escaped, he said he would rather be in hell than be pressed.¹ He was now going to wait in England to appear against Captain Maxwell—"Oh he's a rascal, sir, he ought to be put in the papers!" The poor man had not been in bed since Friday night—he left Liverpool at 2 o'clock on Saturday morning. He had called at a farm house to beg victuals and had been refused. The woman said she would give him nothing—"Won't you? Then I can't help it." He was excessively like my brother John.

from Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade* (1808)

In 1785, Clarkson (1760–1846) was the author of a prize-winning essay at Cambridge University on "slavery and commerce of the human species, particularly the African." Thereafter he devoted enormous energy to the abolitionist cause. He played a leading role in founding the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787, and in pressing for the abolition of slavery itself after the halting of the slave trade in 1807.

Let us examine the state of the unhappy Africans, reduced to slavery in this manner, while on board the vessels, which are to convey them across the ocean to other lands. And here I must observe at once, that, as far as this part of the evil is concerned, I am at a loss to describe it. Where shall I find words to express properly their sorrow, as arising from the reflection of being parted for ever from their friends, their relatives, and their country? Where shall I find language to paint in appropriate colours the horror of mind brought on by thoughts of their future unknown destination, of which they can augur nothing but misery from all that they have yet seen? How shall I make known their situation,

while labouring under painful disease, or while struggling in the suffocating holds of their prisons, like animals inclosed in an exhausted receiver? How shall I describe their feelings as exposed to all the personal indignities, which lawless appetite or brutal passion may suggest? How shall I exhibit their sufferings as determining to refuse sustenance and die, or as resolving to break their chains, and, disdaining to live as slaves, to punish their oppressors? How shall I give an idea of their agony, when under various punishments and tortures for their reputed crimes? Indeed every part of this subject defies my powers, and I must therefore satisfy myself and the reader with a general representation, or in the words of a celebrated member of Parliament, that "Never was so much human suffering condensed in so small a space."

I now come to the evil, as it has been proved to arise in the third case; or to consider the situation of the unhappy victims of the trade, when their painful voyages are over, or after they have been landed upon their destined shores. And here we are to view them first under the degrading light of cattle. We are to see them examined, handled, selected, separated, and sold. Alas! relatives are separated from relatives, as if, like cattle, they had no rational intellect, no power of feeling the nearness of relationship, nor sense of the duties belonging to the ties of life! We are next to see them labouring, and this for the benefit of those, to whom they are under no obligation, by any law either natural or divine, to obey. We are to see them, if refusing the commands of their purchasers, however weary, or feeble, or indisposed, subject to corporal punishments, and, if forcibly resisting them, to death. We are to see them in a state of general degradation and misery. The knowledge, which their oppressors have of their own crime in having violated the rights of nature, and of the disposition of the injured to seek all opportunities of revenge, produces a fear, which dictates to them the necessity of a system of treatment by which they shall keep up a wide distinction between the two, and by which the noble feelings of the latter shall be kept down, and their spirits broken. We are to see them again subject to individual persecution, as anger, or malice, or any bad passion may suggest. Hence the whip—the chain—the iron-collar. Hence the various modes of private torture, of which so many accounts have been truly given. Nor can such

¹ *pressed* Forced into naval service. "Press gangs" were authorized to force men into the navy at this period.

horrible cruelties be discovered so as to be made punishable, while the testimony of any number of the oppressed is invalid against the oppressors, however they may be offences against the laws. And, lastly, we are to see their innocent offspring, against whose person liberty the shadow of an argument cannot be advanced, inheriting all the miseries of their parents' lot.

from Matthew "Monk" Lewis, *Journal of A West India Proprietor* (1815–17)

Lewis, whose father was the absentee owner of sugar plantations in Jamaica and the Deputy Secretary of War, became well known with the publication of *The Monk*, a sensational Gothic novel written in a ten-week period when he was nineteen years old. Lewis inherited his father's property in 1812, and made two trips to Jamaica (in 1815–15 and 1817–18) with a view to ascertaining the condition of the plantations and ameliorating conditions for the slaves. His journals were first offered for publication in 1817, but did not appear in print until 1834, sixteen years after Lewis's death from yellow fever, during the return voyage after his second residence in Jamaica.

Though Lewis was clearly considerably more humane than most plantation owners, he opposed any move to abolish slavery, on the grounds that it was necessary to the plantation economy.

15 January 1815

The offspring of a white man and black woman is a *mulatto*; the mulatto and black produce a *sambo*; from the mulatto and white comes the *quadroon*; from the quadroon and white the *mustee*; the child of a mustee by a white man is called a *musteefino*; while the children of a musteefino are free by law, and rank as white persons to all intents and purposes. I think it is Long who asserts, that two mulattoes will never have children; but, as far as the most positive assurances can go, since my arrival in Jamaica, I have reason to believe the contrary, and that mulattoes breed together just as well as blacks and whites; but they are almost universally weak and effeminate persons, and thus their children are very difficult to rear. On a sugar estate one black is consid-

ered as more than equal to two mulattoes. Beautiful as are their forms in general, and easy and graceful as are their movements (which, indeed, appear to me so striking, that they cannot fail to excite the admiration of any one who has ever looked with delight on statues), still the women of colour are deficient in one of the most requisite points of female beauty. When Oromases¹ was employed in the formation of woman, and said,—“Let her enchanting bosom resemble the celestial spheres,” he must certainly have suffered the negress to slip out of his mind. Young or old, I have not yet seen such a thing as a *bosom*.

16 January 1815

I never witnessed on the stage a scene so picturesque as a negro village. I walked through my own to-day, and visited the houses of the drivers, and other principal persons; and if I were to decide according to my own taste, I should infinitely have preferred their habitations to my own. Each house is surrounded by a separate garden, and the whole village is intersected by lanes, bordered with all kinds of sweet-smelling and flowering plants; but not such gardens as those belonging to our English cottages, where a few cabbages and carrots just peep up and grovel upon the earth between hedges, in square narrow beds, and where the tallest tree is a gooseberry bush: the vegetables of the negroes are all cultivated in their provision-grounds; these form their *kitchen-gardens*, and these are all for ornament or luxury, and are filled with a profusion of oranges, shaddocks, cocoa-nuts, and peppers of all descriptions: in particular I was shown the *abba*, or palm tree, resembling the cocoa-tree, but much more beautiful, as its leaves are larger and more numerous, and, feathering to the ground as they grow old, they form a kind of natural arbour. It bears a large fruit, or rather vegetable, towards the top of the tree, in shape like the cone of the pine, but formed of seeds, some scarlet and bright as coral, others of a brownish-red or purple. The *abba* requires a length of years to arrive at maturity: a very fine one, which was shown me this morning, was supposed to be upwards of an hundred years old; and one of a very moderate size had been planted at the least twenty years, and had only borne fruit once.

¹ Oromases ?

It appears to me a strong proof of the good treatment which the negroes on Cornwall have been accustomed to receive, that there are many very old people upon it; I saw to-day a woman near a hundred years of age; and I am told that there are several of sixty, seventy, and eighty. I was glad, also, to find, that several negroes who have obtained their freedom, and possess little properties of their own in the mountains, and at Savannah la Mar, look upon my estate so little as the scene of their former sufferings while slaves, that they frequently come down to pass a few days in their ancient habitations with their former companions, by way of relaxation. One woman in particular expressed her hopes, that I should not be offended at her still coming to Cornwall now and then, although she belonged to it no longer; and begged me to give directions before my return to England, that her visits should not be hindered on the grounds of her having no business there.

My visit to Jamaica has at least produced one advantage to myself. Several runaways, who had disappeared for some time (some even for several months), have again made their appearance in the field, and I have desired that no questions should be asked. On the other hand, after enjoying herself during the Saturday and Sunday, which were allowed for holidays on my arrival, one of my ladies chose *to pull foot*, and did not return from her hiding-place in the mountains till this morning. Her name is Marcia; but so unlike is she to Addison's Marcia, that she is not only as black as Juba, (instead of being "fair, oh! how divinely fair!") but,—whereas Sempronius complains, that "Marcia, the lovely Marcia, is left behind," the complaint against my heroine is, that "Marcia, the lovely Marcia" is always running away. In excuse for her disappearance she alleged, that so far was her husband from thinking that "she towered above her sex," that he had called her "a very bad woman," which had provoked her so much, that she could not bear to stay with him; and she assured me, that he was himself "a very bad man"; which, if true, was certainly enough to justify any lady, black or white, in making a little incognito excursion for a week or so; therefore, as it appeared to be nothing more than a conjugal quarrel, and as Marcia engaged never to run away any more (at the same time allowing that she had suffered her resentment to carry her too far, when it had

carried her all the way to the mountains), I desired that an act of oblivion might be passed in favour of Cato's daughter, and away she went, quite happy, to pick hog's meat.

The negro houses are composed of wattles¹ on the outside, with rafters of sweet-wood, and are well plastered within and white-washed; they consist of two chambers, one for cooking and the other for sleeping, - and are, in general, well furnished with chairs, tables, etc., and I saw none without a four-post bedstead and plenty of bedclothes; for, in spite of the warmth of the climate, when the sun is not above the horizon the negro always feels very chilly. I am assured that many of my slaves are very rich (and their property is inviolable), and that they are never without salt provisions, porter, and even wine, to entertain their friends and their visitors from the bay or the mountains. As I passed through their grounds, many little requests were preferred to me: one wanted an additional supply of lime for the whitewashing his house; another was building a new house for a superannuated wife (for they have all so much decency as to call their sexual attachments by a conjugal name), and wanted a little assistance towards the finishing it; a third requested a new axe to work with; and several entreated me to negotiate the purchase of some relation or friend belonging to another estate, and with whom they were anxious to be reunited: but all their requests were for additional indulgences; not one complained of ill-treatment, hunger, or over-work.

Poor Nicholas gave me a fresh instance of his being one of those whom Fortune pitches upon to show her spite: he has had four children, none of whom are alive; and the eldest of them, a fine little girl of four years old, fell into the mill-stream, and was drowned before any one was aware of her danger. His wife told me that she had had fifteen children, had taken the utmost care of them, and yet had now but two alive: she said, indeed, fifteen at the first, but she afterwards corrected herself, and explained that she had had "twelve whole children and three half ones"; by which she meant miscarriages.

Besides the profits arising from their superabundance of provisions, which the better sort of negroes are enabled to sell regularly once a week at Savannah la Mar to a considerable amount, they keep a large stock of

¹ *wattles* Woven branches.

poultry, and pigs without number; which latter cost their owners but little, though they cost me a great deal; for they generally make their way into the cane-pieces, and sometimes eat me up an hogshead of sugar in the course of the morning; but the most expensive of the planter's enemies are the rats, whose numbers are incredible, and are so destructive that a reward is given for killing them. During the last six months my agent has paid for three thousand rats killed upon Cornwall. Nor is the sugar which they consume the worst damage which they commit; the worst mischief is, that if, through the carelessness of those whose business it is to supply the mill, one cane which has been gnawed by the rats is allowed admittance, that single damaged piece is sufficient to produce acidity enough to spoil the whole sugar.

24 February 1815

On the Sunday after my first arrival, the whole body of Eboe negroes came to me to complain of the attorney, and more particularly of one of the book-keepers. I listened to them, if not with unwearied patience, at least with unsubdued fortitude, for above an hour and a half; and finding some grounds for their complaint against the latter, in a few days I went down to their quarter of the village, told them that to please them I had discharged the book-keeper, named a day for examining their other grievances, and listened to them for an hour more. When the day of trial came, they sent me word that they were perfectly satisfied, and had no complaint to make. I was, therefore, much surprised to receive a visit from Edward, the Eboe, yesterday evening, who informed me, that during my absence his fellows had formed a plan of making a complaint *en masse* to a neighbouring magistrate; and that, not only against the attorney, but against myself "for not listening to them when they were injured"; and Edward claimed great merit with me for having prevented their taking this step, and convinced them, that while I was on the estate myself, there could be no occasion for applying to a third person. Now, having made me aware of my great obligations to him, here Edward meant the matter to rest; but being a good deal incensed at their ingratitude, I instantly sent for the Eboes, and enquired into the matter; when it appeared, that Edward (who is a clever

fellow, and has great influence over the rest) had first goaded them into a resolution of complaining to a magistrate, had then stopped them from putting their plan into execution, and that the whole was a plot of Edward's, in order to make a merit with me for himself at the expense of his countrymen. However, as they confessed their having had the intention of applying to Mr. Hill as a magistrate, I insisted upon their executing their intention. I told them, that as Mr. Hill was the person whom they had selected for their protector, to Mr. Hill they should go; that they should either make their complaint to him against me, or confess that they had been telling lies, and had no complaint to make; and that, as the next day was to be a play-day given them by me, instead of passing it at home in singing and dancing, they should pass it at the Bay in stating their grievances.

This threw them into terrible confusion; they cried out that they wanted to make no complaint whatever, and that it was all Edward's fault, who had misled them. Three of them, one after the other, gave him the lie to his face; and each and all (Edward as well as the rest) declared that go to the Bay they absolutely would *not*. The next morning they were all at the door waiting for my coming out: they positively refused to go to Mr. Hill, and begged and prayed, and humbled themselves; now scraping and bowing to me, and then blackguarding Edward with all their might and main; and when I ordered the driver to take charge of them, and carry them to Mr Hill, some of them fairly took to their heels, and ran away. However, the rest soon brought them back again, for they swore that if one went, all should go; and away they were marched, in a string of about twenty, with the driver at their head. When they got to the Bay, they told Mr Hill that, as to their massa, they had no complaint to make against him, except that he had compelled them to make one; and what they said against the attorney was so trifling, that the magistrate bade the driver take them all back again. Upon which they slunk away to their houses, while the Creoles cried out "Shame! shame!" as they passed along.

Indeed, the Creoles could not have received a greater pleasure than the mortification of the Eboes; for the two bodies hate each other as cordially as the Guelphs and

Ghibellines;¹ and after their departure for the Bay, I heard the head cook haranguing a large audience, and declaring it to be her fixed opinion, "that massa ought to sell all the Eboes, and buy Creoles instead." Probably, Mrs/ Cook was not the less loud in her exclamations against the ingratitude of the Eboes, from her own loyalty having lately been questioned. She had found fault one day in the hospital with some women who feigned sickness in order to remain idle. "You no work willing for massa," said Mrs. Cook, "and him so vex, him say him go to Kingston to-morrow, and him wish him neber come back again!"—"What!" cried Philippa, the mad woman, "you wish massa neber come back from Kingston?" So she gave Mrs. Cook a box on the ear with all her might; upon which Mrs. Cook snatched up a stick and broke the mad woman's pate with it. But though she could beat a hole in her head, she never could beat out of it her having said that she wished massa might never come back. And although Philippa has recovered her senses, in her belief of Mrs. Cook's disloyalty she continues firm; and they never meet without renewing the dispute.

To-day being a play-day, the gaiety of the negroes was promoted by a distribution of an additional quantity of salt-fish (which forms a most acceptable ingredient in their pepper-pots), and as much rum and sugar as they chose to drink. But there was also a dinner prepared at the house where the "white people" reside, expressly for none but the *piccaninny-mothers*; that is, for the women who had children living. I had taken care, when this play-day was announced by the head driver, to make him inform the negroes that they were indebted for it entirely to these mothers; and to show them the more respect, I went to them after dinner myself, and drank their healths. The most respectable blacks on the estate were also assembled in the room; and I then told them that clothes would wear out, and money would be spent, and that I wished to give them something more lasting than clothes or money. The law only allows them, as a matter of right, every alternate Saturday for themselves, and holidays for three days at Christmas, which, with all Sundays, forms their whole legal time of relaxation. I therefore granted them as a matter of right,

and of which no person should deprive them on any account whatever, *every* Saturday to cultivate their grounds; and in addition to their holidays at Christmas, I gave them for play-days Good-Friday, the second Friday in October, and the second Friday in July. By which means, they will in future have the same number of holidays four times a year, which hitherto they have been allowed only once, *i.e.* at Christmas. The first is to be called "the royal play-day," in honour of that excellent Princess, the Duchess of York; and the negroes are directed to give three cheers upon the head driver's announcing "The health of our good lady, HRH the Duchess of York." And I told them, that before my leaving the island, I should hear them drink this health, and should not fail to let Her Royal Highness know, that the negroes of Cornwall drank her health every year. This evidently touched the right chord of their vanity, and they all bowed and courtesied down to the very ground, and said, that would do them much high honour. The ninth being my own birthday, the July play-day is to be called "the massa's"; and that in October is to be in honour of the *piccaninny-mothers*, from whom it is to take its name.

The poor creatures overflowed with gratitude; and the prospective indulgences which had just been announced, gave them such an increase of spirits, that on returning to my own residence, they fell to singing and dancing again with as much violence as if they had been a pack of French furies at the Opera. The favourite song of the light was, "Since massa come, we very well off"; which words they repeated in chorus, without intermission (dancing all the time), for hours together; till, at half-past three, neither my eyes nor my brain could endure it any longer, and I was obliged to send them word that I wanted to go to bed, and could not sleep till the noise should cease.

1 May 1815 (Friday)

This morning I signed the manumission of Nicholas Cameron, the best of my mulatto carpenters. He had been so often on the very point of getting his liberty, and still the cup was dashed from his lips, that I had promised to set him free, whenever he could procure an able negro as his substitute; although being a good workman, a single negro was by no means an adequate

¹ *Guelphs and Ghibellines* Opposing factions in political struggles between papal and imperial powers during the later Middle Ages.

price in exchange. On my arrival this year I found that he had agreed to pay 150*l.* for a female negro, and the woman was approved of by my trustee. But on enquiry it appeared that she had a child, from which she was unwilling to separate, and that her owner refused to sell the child, except at a most unreasonable price. Here then was an insurmountable objection to my accepting her, and Nicholas was told to his great mortification, that he must look out for another substitute. The woman, on her part, was determined to belong to Cornwall estate and no other: so she told her owner, that if he attempted to sell her elsewhere she would make away with herself, and on his ordering her to prepare for a removal to a neighbouring proprietor's, she disappeared, and concealed herself so well, that for some time she was believed to have put her threats of suicide into execution. The idea of losing his 150*l.* frightened her master so completely, that he declared himself ready to let me have the child at a fair price, as well as the mother, if she ever should be found; and her friends having conveyed this assurance to her, she thought proper to emerge from her hiding-place, and the bargain was arranged finally. The titles, however, were not yet made out, and as the time of my departure for Hordley was arrived, these were ordered to be got ready against my return, when the negroes were to be delivered over to me, and Nicholas was to be set free. In the meanwhile, the child was sent by her mistress (a free mulatto) to hide some stolen ducks upon a distant property, and on her return blabbed out the errand: in consequence the mistress was committed to prison for theft; and no sooner was she released, than she revenged herself upon the poor girl by giving her thirty lashes with the cattle-whip, inflicted with all the severity of vindictive malice. This treatment of a child of such tender years reduced her to such a state, as made the magistrates think it right to send her for protection to the workhouse, until the conduct of the mistress should have been enquired into. In the meanwhile, as the result of the enquiry might be the setting the girl at liberty, the joint title for her and her mother could not be made out, and thus poor Nicholas's manumission was at a stand-still again. The magistrates at length decided, that although the chastisement had been severe, yet (according to the medical report) it was not such as to authorise the sending the

mistress to be tried at the assizes. She was accordingly dismissed from farther investigation, and the girl was once more considered as belonging to me, as soon as the title could be made out. But the fatality which had so often prevented Nicholas from obtaining his freedom, was not weary yet. On the very morning, when he was to sign the title, a person whose signature was indispensable, was thrown out of his chaise, the wheel of which passed over his head, and he was rendered incapable of transacting business for several weeks. Yesterday, the titles were at length brought to me complete, and this morning put Nicholas in possession of the object, in the pursuit of which he has experienced such repeated disappointments. The conduct of the poor child's mulatto mistress in this case was most unpardonable, and is only one of numerous instances of a similar description, which have been mentioned to me. Indeed, I have every reason to believe, that nothing can be uniformly more wretched, than the life of the slaves of free people of colour in Jamaica; nor would any thing contribute more to the relief of the black population, than the prohibiting by law any mulatto to become the owner of a slave for the future. Why should not rich people of colour be served by poor people of colour, hiring them as domestics? It seldom happens that mulattoes are in possession of plantations; but when a white man dies, who happens to possess twenty negroes, he will divide them among his brown family, leaving (we may say) five to each of his four children. These are too few to be employed in plantation work; they are, therefore, ordered to maintain their owner by some means or other, and which means are frequently not the most honest, the most frequent being the travelling about as higglers, and exchanging the trumpery contents of their packs and boxes with plantation negroes for stolen rum and sugar. I confess I cannot see why, on such bequest being made, the law should not order the negroes to be sold, and the produce of the sale paid to the mulatto heirs, but absolutely prohibiting the mulattoes from becoming proprietors of the negroes themselves. Every man of humanity must wish that slavery, even in its best and most mitigated form, had never found a legal sanction, and must regret that its system is now so incorporated with the welfare of Great Britain as well as of Jamaica, as to make its extirpation an absolute

impossibility, without the certainty of producing worse mischiefs than the one which we annihilate. But certainly there can be no sort of occasion for continuing in the colonies the existence of *domestic slavery*, which neither contributes to the security of the colonies themselves, nor to the opulence of the mother-country,

the revenue of which derived from colonial duties would suffer no defalcation whatever, even if neither whites nor blacks in the West Indies were suffered to employ slaves, except in plantation labour.