

The Slave Trade: A Poem

Hannah More

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– O great design! Ye sons of mercy! O complete your work; Wrench from
Oppression's hand the iron rod, And bid the cruel feel the pains they give. Thompson's "Li

IF Heaven has into being deign'd to call
Thy light, O liberty! to shine on all;
Bright intellectual sun! why does thy ray
To earth distribute only partial day?
Since no resisting cause from spirit flows
Thy universal presence to oppose;
No obstacles by nature's hand imprest,
Thy subtle and ethereal beams arrest;
Not sway'd by Matter is thy course benign,
Or more direct or more oblique to shine;
Nor Motion's laws can speed thy active course,
Nor strong Repulsion's pow'rs obstruct thy force;
Since there is no convexity in mind,
Why are thy genial beams to parts confin'd?
While the chill north with thy bright ray is blest,
Why should fell darkness half the south invest?
Was it decreed, fair Freedom! at thy birth,
That thou should'st ne'er irradiate all the earth?
While Britain basks in thy full blaze of light,
Why lies sad Afric quench'd in total night?
Thee only, sober goddess! I attest,
In smiles chastis'd, and decent graces drest,
To thee alone pure daughter of the skies,
The hallow'd incense of the bard should rise?
Not that mad liberty, in whose wild praise
Too oft he trims his prostituted bays;
Not that unlicens'd monster of the crowd,
Whose roar terrific bursts in peals so loud,
Deaf'ning the ear of Peace; fierce Faction's tool,
Of rash Sedition born, and mad Misrule;
Whose stubborn mouth, rejecting Reason's reign,
No strength can govern, and no skill restrain;
Whose magic cries the frantic vulgar draw
To spurn at Order, and to outrage Law;
To tread on grave Authority and Pow'r,
And shake the work of ages in an hour:
Convuls'd her voice, and pestilent her breath,
She raves of mercy, while she deals out death;
Each blast is fate; she darts from either hand
Red conflagration o'er the astonish'd land;

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Clamouring for peace, she rends the air with noise,
And to reform a part, the whole destroys.
Reviles oppression only to oppress,
And in the act of murder breathes redress.
Such have we seen on Freedom's genuine coast,
Bellowing for blessings which were never lost.
'Tis past, and Reason rules the lucid hour,
And beauteous ORDER reassumes his power:
Lord of the bright ascendant may he reign,
Till perfect Peace eternal sway maintain!
O, plaintive Southerne! whose impassion'd page
Can melt the soul to grief, or rouse to rage!
Now, when congenial themes engage the Muse,
She burns to emulate thy generous views;
Her failing efforts mock her fond desires,
She shares thy feelings, not partakes thy fires.
Strange pow'r of song the strain that warms the heart
Seems the same inspiration to impart;
Touch'd by th' extrinsic energy alone,
We think the flame which melts us is our own:
Deceiv'd, for genius we mistake delight,
Charm'd as we read, we fancy we can write.
Though not to me, sweet bard, thy pow'rs belong.
The cause I plead shall sanctify my song.
The Muse awakes no artificial fire,
For Truth rejects what Fancy would inspire:
Here Art would weave her gayest flow'rs in vain,
The bright invention Nature would disdain.
For no fictitious ills these numbers flow,
But living anguish, and substantial wo;
No individual griefs my bosom melt,
For millions feel what Oronoko felt:
Fir'd by no single wrongs, the countless host
I mourn, by rapine dragg'd from Afric's coast.
Perish th' illiberal thought which would debase
The native genius of the sable race!
Perish the proud philosophy, which sought
To rob them of the pow'rs of equal thought!
Does then th' immortal principle within
Change with the casual colour of the skin?
Does Matter govern Spirit? or is mind
Degraded by the form to which 'tis join'd?
No: they have heads to think, and hearts to feel,
And souls to act, with firm, though erring zeal
For they have keen affections, kind desires,
Love strong as death, and active patriot fires;
All the rude energy, the fervid flame,
Of high-soul'd passion, and ingenuous shame:
Strong, but luxuriant virtues boldly shoot
From the wild vigour of a savage root.
Nor weak their sense of honour's proud control,

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For Pride is virtue in a Pagan soul;
A sense of worth, a conscience of desert,
A high, unbroken haughtiness of heart;
That self-same stuff which erst proud empires sway'd,
Of which the conquerors of the world were made
Capricious fate of men ! that very pride
In Afric scourg'd, in Rome was deify'd.
No muse, O Quashi! shall thy deeds relate,
No statue snatch thee from oblivious fate!
For thou wast born where tower gentle Muse
On valour's grave the flow'rs of Genius strews
And thou wast born where no recording page
Plucks the fair deed from Time's devouring rage:
Had Fortune placed thee on some happier coast,
Where polis'd Pagans souls heroic boast,
To thee who sought'st a voluntary grave,
Th' injur'd honours of thy name to save,
Whose generous arm thy barbarous master spar'd,
Altars had smok'd, and temples had been rear'd.
Whene'er to Afric's shores I turn my eyes,
Horrors of deepest, deadliest guilt arise;
I see, by more than Fancy's mirror shown,
The burning village and the blazing town:
See the dire victim torn from social life,
The shrieking babe, the agonizing wife!
She, wretch forlorn! is dragg'd by hostile hands
To distant tyrants sold, in distant lands!
Transmitted miseries and successive chains,
The sole sad heritage her child obtains!
E'en this last wretched boon their foes deny,
To weep together, or together die.
By felon hands, by one relentless stroke,
See the fond links of feeling Nature broke!
The fibres twisting round a parent's heart,
Torn from their grasp, and bleeding as they part.
Hold! murderer's, hold! nor aggravate distress
Respect the passions you yourselves possess,
Ev'n you of ruffian heart, and ruthless hand,
Love your own offspring, love your native land:
Ev'n you, with fond impatient feelings burn,
Though free as air, though certain of return,
Then, if to you who voluntarily roam,
So dear the memory of your distant home,
O think how absence the lov'd scene endears
To him whose food is groans, whose drink is tears;
Think on the wretch whose aggravated pains
To exile misery adds, to misery chains.
If warm your heart, to British feelings true,
As dear his land to him as yours to you;
And Liberty, in you a hallow'd flame,
Burns, unextinguish'd in his breast the same.

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Then leave him holy Freedom's cheering smile
The heav'n-taught fondness for the parent son,
Revere affections mingled with our frame,
In every nature, every clime the same;
In all, these feelings equal sway maintain:
In all the love of Home and Freedom reign;
And Tempe's vale, and parch'd Angola's sand,
One equal fondness of their son's command.
Th' unconquer'd savage laughs at pain and toil,
Basking in Freedom's beams which gild his native soil.
Does thirst of empire, does desire of fame,
(For these are specious crimes) our rage inflame?
No: sordid lust of gold their fate controls,
The basest appetite of basest souls;
Gold, better gain'd by what their ripening sky,
Their fertile fields, their arts, and mines supply.
What wrongs, what injuries does Oppression plead,
To smooth the crime and sanctify the deed ?
What strange offence, what aggravated sin ?
They stand convicted — of a darker skin !
Barbarians, hold! th' opprobrious commerce spare,
Respect HIS sacred image which they bear.
Though dark and savage, ignorant and blind,
They claim the common privilege of kind;
Let malice strip them of each other plea,
They still are men, and men should still be free.
Insulted Reason loathes the inverted trade —
Loathes, as she views the human purchase made;
The outrag'd goddess, with abhorrent eyes,
Sees MAN the traffic, SOULS the merchandise !
Man, whom fair Commerce taught with judging eye,
And liberal hand, to barter or to buy,
Indignant Nature blushes to behold,
Degraded man himself, truck'd, barter'd, sold:
Of ev'ry native privilege bereft,
Yet curs'd with ev'ry wounded feeling left.
Hard lot ! each brutal suffering to sustain,
Yet keep the sense acute of human pain.
Plead not, in reason's palpable abuse,
Their sense of feeling callous and obtuse:
From heads to hearts lies Nature's plain appeal,
Though few can reason, all mankind can feel.
Though wit may boast a livelier dread of shame
A loftier sense of long refinement claim;
Though polish'd manners may fresh wants invent,
And nice distinctions nicer souls torment;
Though these on finer spirits heavier fall,
Yet natural evils are the same to all.
Tho' wounds there are which reason's force may heal,
There needs no logic sure to make us feel.
The nerve, howe'er untutor'd, can sustain

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A sharp unutterable sense of pain;
As exquisitely fashion'd in a slave,
As where unequal fate a sceptre gave.
Sense is as keen where Gambia's waters glide,
As where proud Tiber rolls his classic tide.
Though verse or rhetoric point the feeling line,
They do not whet sensation, but define.
Did ever wretch less feel the galling chain,
When Zeno prov'd there was no ill in pain?
In vain the sage to smooth its horror tries;
Spartans and Helots see with different eyes;
Their miseries philosophic quirks deride,
Slaves groan in pangs disown'd by stoic pride.
When the fierce sun darts vertical his beams,
And thirst and hunger mix their wild extremes;
When the sharp iron wounds his inmost soul,
And his strain'd eyes in burning anguish roll;
Will the parch'd negro own, ere he expire,
No pain in hunger, and no heat in fire?
For him, when agony his frame destroys,
What hope of present fame or future joys?
For that have heroes shorten'd nature's date,
For this have martyrs gladly met their fate;
But him forlorn, no heroes pride sustains,
No martyr's blissful vision soothe his pains;
Sullen, he mingles with his kindred dust,
For he had learn'd to dread the Christian's trust;
To him what mercy can that GOD display,
Whose servants murder, and whose sons betray?
Savage! thy venial error I deplore,
They are not Christians who infest thy shore.
O thou sad spirit, whose preposterous yoke
The great deliverer Death, at length has broke,
Releas'd from misery, and escap'd from care,
Go, meet that mercy man deny'd thee here.
In thy dark home, sure refuge of th' oppress'd,
The wicked vex not, and the weary rest.
And, if some notions, vague and undefin'd,
Of future terror have assail'd thy mind;
If such thy masers have presum'd to teach,
As terrors only they are prone to preach;
(For should they paint eternal Mercy's reign,
Where were the oppressor's rod, the captive's chain?)
If, then, thy troubled soul has learn'd to dread
The dark unknown thy trembling footsteps tread;
On HIM, who made thee what thou art, depend;
HE, who withholds the means, accepts the end.
Thy metal night thy Saviour will not blame;
He died for those who never heard his name.
Not thine the reckoning dire of LIGHT abus'd,
KNOWLEDGE disgrac'd, and LIBERTY misus'd;

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On thee no awful judge incens'd shall sit
For parts perverted, and dishonour'd wit.
Where ignorance may be found the safest plea,
How many learn'd and wise shall envy thee!
And thou, WHITE SAVAGE! whether lust of gold
Or lust of conquest rule thee uncontroll'd!
Hero, or robber! — by whatever name! —
Thou plead thy impious claim to wealth or fame;
Whether inferior mischief be thy boast,
A tyrant trader rifling Congo's coast;
Or bolder carnage track thy crimson way,
Kings dispossess'd, and provinces thy prey;
Whether thou pant to tame earth's distant bound;
All Cortez murder'd, all Columbus found;
O'er plunder'd realms to reign, detested lord,
Make millions wretched, and thyself abhorr'd: —
Whether Cartouche in forests break the law.
Or bolder C³asar keep the world in awe;
In Reason's eye, in Wisdom's fair account,
Your sum of glory boasts a like amount;
The means may differ, but the end's the same,
Conquest is pillage with a nobler name,
Who makes the sum of human blessings less,
Or sinks the stock of general happiness,
Tho' erring fame may grace, tho' false renown
His life may blazon or his memory crown;
Yet the last audit shall reverse the cause;
And God shall vindicate his broken laws.
Had those advent'rous spirits who explore
Thro' ocean's trackless wastes, the far-sought shore;
Whether of wealth insatiate, or of pow'r,
Conquerors who waste, or ruffian's who devour
Had these possess'd, O COOK! thy gentle mind,
Thy love of arts, thy love of human kind;
Had these pursued thy mild and liberal plan,
DISCOVERIES had not been a curse to man!
Then, bless'd Philanthropy! thy social hands,
Had link'd dissever'd worlds in brothers' bands;
Careless, if colour, or if clime divide;
Then lov'd and loving, man had liv'd and died.
Then with pernicious skill we had not known
To bring their vices back and leave our own.
The purest wreaths which hang on Glory's shrine,
For empires founded, peaceful Penn ! are thine;
No blood-stain'd laurels crown'd thy virtuous toil,
No slaughter'd natives drench'd the fair-earn'd soil,
Still thy meek spirit in thy flock survives,
Consistent still, their doctrines rule their lives;
Thy followers only have effac'd the shame,
Inscrib'd by SLAVERY on the Christian name.
Shall Britain, where the soul of freedom reigns,

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Forge chains for others she herself disdains?
Forbid it, Heaven ! O let the nations know
The liberty she loves, she will bestow;
Not to herself the glorious gift confin'd,
She spreads the blessing wide as human kind,
And, scorning narrow views of time and place.
Bids all be free in earth's extended space.
What page of human annals can record
A deed so bright as human rights restor'd?
O may that god-like deed, that shining page,
Redeem OUR fame, and consecrate OUR age!
And let this glory mark our favour'd shore,
To curb False Freedom and the True restore
And see the cherub Mercy from above,
Descending softly, quits the sphere of love!
On Britain's isle she sheds her heavenly dew;
And breathes her spirit o'er th' enlighten'd few
From soul to soul the spreading influence steals
Till every breast the soft contagion feels.
She speeds, exulting, to the burning shore,
With the best message angel ever bore;
Hark! 'tis the note which spoke a Saviour's birth!
Glory to God on high, and peace on earth!
She vindicates the pow'r in Heaven ador'd,
She stills the clank of chains, and sheathes the sword;
She cheers the mourner, and with soothing hands
From bursting hearts unbinds th' oppressor's bands;
Restores the lustre of the Christian name,
And clears the foulest blot that dimm'd its fame.
As the mild spirit hovers o'er the coast,
A fresher hue their wither'd landscapes boast;
Her healing smiles the ruin'd scenes repair,
And blasted Nature wears a joyous air;
While she proclaims thro' all their spicy groves,
'Henceforth your fruits, your labours, and your loves,
'All that your sires possess'd, or you have sown,
'Sacred from plunder — all is now YOUR OWN.'
And now, her high commission from above,
Stamp'd with the holy characters of love,
The meek-ey'd spirit waving in her hand,
Breathes manumission o'er the rescu'd land;
She tears the banner stain'd with blood and tears,
And LIBERTY! thy shining standard rears!
As the bright ensign's glory she displays,
See pale OPPRESSION faints beneath the blaze!
The giant dies! no more his frown appals,
The chain, untouch'd drops off; the fetter falls.
Astonish'd Echo tells the vocal shore,
Oppression's fall'n, and Slavery is no more!
The dusky myriads crowd the sultry plain,
All hail that MERCY, long invok'd in vain.

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Victorious Pow'r! she bursts their two-fold bands,
And Faith and Freedom spring from Britain's hands.
And Thou! great source of Nature and of Grace,
Who of one blood didst form the human race
Look down in mercy in thy chosen time,
With equal eye on Afric's suffring clime:
Disperse her shades of intellectual night,
Repeat thy high behest — Let there be Light
Bring each benighted soul, great God, to Thee,
And with thy wide salvation make them free!