

Hannah More

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Hannah More (1745-1833) was a writer and philanthropist dedicated to Abolition and education for all. Born in Bristol, England, she was the fourth of five daughters to Mary Grace and Jacob More. More was engaged at twenty-two, but like all her sisters never married, and they maintained a close sibling relationship. In an era when women were expected to be domesticated, More's mother and schoolmaster father rebelled against gender roles by educating their daughters in academics from a young age. William Turner, a wealthy landowner twenty years More's senior, broke off their engagement in 1773 after postponing their wedding three times in six years. The two-hundred-pound annuity More received from Turner for breaking their engagement enabled her to retire from teaching at her family's school and dedicate her time to writing. In 1773 More published the first play she had written eleven years earlier at the age of seventeen: *The Search After Happiness: A Pastoral Drama for Young Ladies* (1762). More wrote two more plays, *The Inflexible Captive* (1774) and *Percy* (1777), before turning to religious writing with *Sacred dramas: chiefly intended for young persons: the subjects taken from the Bible. To which is added, Sensibility, a poem* (1782).

After hearing a sermon by John Newton in 1787, More became a member of the Clapham Sect, a group consisting of wealthy philanthropist evangelicals. In the Clapham Sect, More was introduced to William Wilberforce, a British politician and active leader in the Abolitionist movement. Their friendship inspired her devotion to the Abolitionist cause. In 1788 More wrote *Slavery, a Poem* in support of Wilberforce's parliamentary campaign to pass his Slave Trade Act. Widely distributed as propaganda throughout Britain, this poem contributed to the end of slavery in the British empire. Written in iambic pentameter, the condensed epic juxtaposes civility with barbarity, to appeal to intellect, emotion, and morality. In just under three hundred lines, the poem poses rhetorical questions and invokes divinity, writers, explorers, geographic locales, and the mistreatment of slaves. The simple heroic couplet rhyme scheme echoes the poem's direct humanitarian call to end slavery. For forty-five years after 1788 More dedicated her life to Abolition and followed in her family's footsteps to open her own schools to educate impoverished children. More survived all her sisters and lived to see the passing of the British Slavery Abolition Act of 1833.

She passed away a few months later from health complications at the age of eighty-eight.

Further Reading

“Hannah More (1745-1833).” *British Women Poets of the Romantic Era: An Anthology*, edited by Paula R. Feldman, John Hopkins University P, 1997, pp. 468-482.

Carey, Brycchan. “Slavery and Romanticism.” *Literature Compass*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2006, pp. 397-408. Wiley Online Library, doi: 10.1111/j.1741-4113.2006.00327.x.

Prior, Karen Swallow. *Fierce Convictions: The Extraordinary Life of Hannah More: Poet, Reformer, Abolitionist*. Nelson Books, 2014.

*Slavery, a Poem*¹

IF Heaven has into being deign'd² 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 5
 Thy penetrating essence to oppose;
 No obstacles by Nature's hand imprest,
 Thy subtle and ethereal beams arrest;
 Nor motion's laws can speed thy active course,
 Nor strong repulsion's pow'rs obstruct thy force; 10
 Since there is no convexity³ in MIND,
 Why are thy genial⁴ beams to parts confin'd?
 While the chill North⁵ with thy bright ray is blest,
 Why should fell darkness half the South⁶ invest?
 Was it decreed, fair Freedom! at thy birth, 15
 That thou shou'd'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!⁷ I attest,
 In smiles chastis'd, and decent graces drest.⁸ 20

¹ Published in 1788, reproduced in *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*. This poem was later revised and published in *The Works of Hannah More, vol. 2* (London, 1830). The 1830 version is retitled "The Black Slave Trade. A Poem" and expanded to 356 lines.

² To do something considered undignified.

³ State of being not straight.

⁴ Characteristic of natural ability.

⁵ Britain.

⁶ Africa.

⁷ Aequitas, Roman goddess of equity and fairness.

⁸ Older form of "dressed."

Not that unlicens'd⁹ monster of the crowd,
 Whose roar terrific bursts in peals¹⁰ so loud,
 Deafning the ear of Peace: fierce Faction's tool;
 Of rash Sedition¹¹ born, and mad Misrule;
 Whose stubborn mouth, rejecting Reason's rein, 25
 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: 30
 Convuls'd¹² her voice, and pestilent¹³ her breath,
 She raves of mercy, while she deals out death:
 Each blast is fate; she darts from either hand
 Red conflagration¹⁴ o'er th' astonish'd land;
 Clamouring for peace, she rends the air with noise, 35
 And to reform a part, the whole destroys.
 O, plaintive Southerne!¹⁵ whose impassion'd strain
 So oft has wak'd my languid Muse in vain!
 Now, when congenial themes her cares engage,
 She burns to emulate thy glowing page; 40
 Her failing efforts mock her fond desires,
 She shares thy feelings, not partakes thy fires.

⁹ Lacking formal permission and control.

¹⁰ Reverberating sound, as of thunder.

¹¹ Speech inciting rebellion.

¹² Involuntary contraction.

¹³ Causing fatal disease.

¹⁴ Vast fire destroying a great deal of land.

¹⁵ [More's note] Author of the *Tragedy of Oronoko*. [my note] Thomas Southerne (1660-1746) adapted Aphra Behn's (1640-1689) novella *Oroonoko* (1688) for the stage in 1696. In Southerne's adaptation Oroonoko's lover, Imoinda, was changed from a Black slave to white middle-class woman.

Strange pow'r of song! the strain that warms the heart
 Seems the same inspiration to impart;
 Touch'd by the kindling energy alone, 45
 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.

Tho' not to me, sweet Bard, thy pow'rs belong,
 Fair Truth, a hallow'd¹⁶ guide! inspires my song. 50
 Here Art wou'd weave her gayest flow'rs in vain,
 For Truth the bright invention wou'd disdain.
 For no fictitious ills these numbers¹⁷ flow,
 But living anguish, and substantial woe;
 No individual griefs my bosom melt, 55
 For millions feel what Oronoko¹⁸ felt:
 Fir'd¹⁹ by no single wrongs, the countless host
 I mourn, by rapine²⁰ dragg'd from Afric's coast.

Perish th' illiberal²¹ thought which wou'd debase
 The native genius of the sable race!²² 60
 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 casual²³ colour of a skin?

¹⁶ Consecrated.

¹⁷ Metrical period or feet in poetry.

¹⁸ The character name of an African prince sold into slavery who risks death for love.

¹⁹ Inflamed.

²⁰ Violent seizure of property, which can include kidnapping and rape.

²¹ Bigoted.

²² A description Phillis Wheatley used in "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (1773):
 "Some view our sable race with scornful eye" (line 5).

²³ Random.

Does matter govern spirit? or is mind 65

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, tho' erring zeal;
 For they have keen affections, kind desires,
 Love strong as death, and active patriot fires; 70

All the rude energy, the fervid flame,
 Of high-soul'd passion, and ingenuous shame:²⁴
 Strong, but luxuriant virtues boldly shoot
 From the wild vigour of a savage root.

Nor weak their sense of honour's proud control, 75
 For pride is virtue in a Pagan soul,²⁵

A sense of worth, a conscience of desert,²⁶
 A high, unbroken haughtiness of heart;
 That self-same stuff which erst²⁷ proud empires sway'd,
 Of which the conquerors of the world were made. 80

Capricious fate of man! that very pride
 In Afric scourg'd, in Rome was deify'd.

No Muse, O²⁸ Qua-shi! shall thy deeds relate,

²⁴ A description Thomas Gray used in "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751): "To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame" (line 70).

²⁵ A description Phillis Wheatley used in "On Being Brought From Africa to America" (1773): "'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land, / Taught my benighted soul to understand" (lines 1-2)

²⁶ Deserving, not a landscape lacking water.

²⁷ Before.

²⁸ [More's note] It is a point of honour among negroes of a high spirit to die rather than to suffer their glossy skin to bear the mark of the whip. Qua-shi had somehow offended his master, a young planter with whom he had been bred up in the endearing intimacy of a play-fellow. His services had been faithful; his attachment affectionate. The master resolved to punish him, and pursued him for that purpose. In trying to escape Qua-shi stumbled and fell; the master fell upon him: they wrestled long with doubtful victory; at length Qua-shi got uppermost, and, being firmly seated on his master's breast, he secured his legs with one hand, and with the other drew a sharp knife; then said, "Master, I have been bred up with you from a child; I have loved you as myself: in return,

No statue snatch thee from oblivious fate!
 For thou wast born where never gentle Muse 85
 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 plac'd thee on some happier coast,
 Where polish'd souls heroic virtue boast, 90
 To thee, who sought'st a voluntary grave,
 Th' uninjur'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, 95
 Horrors of deepest, deadliest guilt arise;
 I see, by more than Fancy's mirror²⁹ shewn,
 The burning village, and the blazing town:
 See the dire victim torn from social life,
 The shrieking babe, the agonizing wife! 100
 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!
 Ev'n this last wretched boon their foes deny, 105
 To weep together, or together die.
 By felon hands, by one relentless stroke,
 See the fond links of feeling Nature broke!

you have condemned me to a punishment of which I must ever have borne the marks: thus only I can avoid them;" so saying, he drew the knife with all his strength across his own throat, and fell down dead, without a groan, on his master's body. Ramsay's *Essay on the Treatment of African Slaves*. [my note] Published by the Reverend James Ramsay, M.A. Vicar of Teston, In Kent (1784).

²⁹ Imagination.

The fibres twisting round a parent's heart,
 Torn from their grasp, and bleeding as they part. 110
 Hold, murderers, 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.
 Ah! leave them holy Freedom's cheering smile, 115
 The heav'n-taught fondness for the parent soil;
 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: 120
 And Tempe's vale,³⁰ and parch'd Angola's sand,³¹
 One equal fondness of their sons 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, 125
 (For these are specious crimes³²) 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 arts³³ and mines supply. 130
 What wrongs, what injuries does Oppression plead

³⁰ A valley between southern Olympus and northern Ossa in Greece. The setting is used in Robert Bland's poem *The Four Slaves of Cythera, a Romance in Ten Cantos*: "In Thracian snows, or Tempe's sunny vale" (London, 1809, p.31).

³¹ In the years 1701-1800, the Portuguese used the West African coast as a major hub for slave export.

³² Outwardly attractive but intrinsically superficial.

³³ [More's note] Besides many valuable productions of the soil, cloths and carpets of exquisite manufacture are brought from the coast of Guinea.

To smooth the horror of th' unnatural deed?
 What strange offence, what aggravated sin?
 They stand convicted—of a darker skin!
 Barbarians,³⁴ hold! th' opprobrious³⁵ commerce spare, 135
 Respect *his* sacred image³⁶ which they bear:
 Tho' dark and savage, ignorant and blind,
 They claim the common privilege of kind;³⁷
 Let Malice strip them of each other plea,
 They still are men, and men shou'd still be free. 140
 Insulted Reason loaths th' inverted trade³⁸—
 Dire change! the agent is the purchase made!
 Perplex'd, the baffled Muse involves the tale;
 Nature confounded, well may language fail!
 The outrag'd Goddess with abhorrent eyes 145
 Sees MAN the traffic, SOULS the merchandize!³⁹
 Plead not, in reason's palpable abuse,
 Their sense of⁴⁰ feeling callous and obtuse:
 From heads to hearts lies Nature's plain appeal,
 Tho' few can reason, all mankind can feel. 150
 Tho' wit may boast a livelier dread of shame,
 A loftier sense of wrong refinement claim;
 Tho' polish'd manners may fresh wants invent,

³⁴ Ironic description for British slavers instead of slaves.

³⁵ Language expressing scorn.

³⁶ Christian belief God has created all people equal and in God's image.

³⁷ Not kindness, but the same kind of creature.

³⁸ Illogic and immorality of the slave trade.

³⁹ Commoditizing of people.

⁴⁰ [More's note] Nothing is more frequent than this cruel and stupid argument, that they do not *feel* the miseries inflicted on them as Europeans would do. [my note] A misguided notion that Black people were impervious to pain and thus justified physical abuse.

And nice distinctions nicer souls torment;
 Tho' these on finer spirits heavier fall, 155
 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
 A sharp, unutterable sense of pain; 160
 As exquisitely fashion'd in a slave,
 As where unequal fate a sceptre gave.
 Sense is as keen where Congo's⁴¹ sons preside,
 As where proud Tiber⁴² rolls his classic tide.
 Rhetoric or verse may point the feeling line, 165
 They do not whet⁴³ sensation, but define.
 Did ever slave less feel the galling chain,
 When Zeno⁴⁴ prov'd there was no ill in pain?⁴⁵
Their miseries philosophic quirks deride,
 Slaves groan in pangs disown'd by Stoic pride. 170
 When the fierce Sun darts vertical his beams,
 And thirst and hunger mix their wild extremes;
 When the sharp iron⁴⁶ wounds his inmost soul,
 And his strain'd eyes in burning anguish roll;
 Will the parch'd negro find, ere he expire, 175

⁴¹ After colonization by Belgian King Leopold II (1835-1909) millions were enslaved as labourers for the manufacture of rubber.

⁴² Longest river in Italy, serving as the main watercourse for Rome.

⁴³ Sharpen.

⁴⁴ 5th c. B.C.E. Stoic philosopher known for propounding paradoxes.

⁴⁵ One of Zeno's paradoxes: pain is unpleasant but not evil.

⁴⁶ [More's note] This is not said figuratively. The writer of these lines has seen a complete set of chains, fitted to every separate limb of these unhappy, innocent men; together with instruments for wrenching open the jaws, contrived with such ingenious cruelty as would shock the humanity of an inquisitor.

No pain in hunger, and no heat in fire?

For him, when fate his tortur'd frame destroys,
 What hope of present fame, or future joys?
 For *this*, have heroes shorten'd nature's date;
 For *that*, have martyrs gladly met their fate; 180
 But him, forlorn, no hero's pride sustains,
 No martyr's blissful visions sooth his pains;
 Sullen, he mingles with his kindred dust,
 For he has learn'd to dread the Christian's trust;
 To him what mercy can that Pow'r display, 185
 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 yoke⁴⁷
 The great deliverer Death, at length, has broke! 190
 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, 195
 Of future terrors have assail'd⁴⁸ thy mind;
 If such thy masters have presum'd to teach,
 As terrors only they are prone to preach;
 (For shou'd they paint eternal Mercy's reign,
 Where were th' oppressor's rod, the captive's chain?) 200
 If, then, thy troubled soul has learn'd to dread

⁴⁷ Oppressive agency.

⁴⁸ Assaulted.

The dark unknown thy trembling footsteps tread;
 On HIM, who made thee what thou art, depend;
 HE, who withholds the means, accepts the end.
 Not *thine* the reckoning dire of LIGHT abus'd, 205
 KNOWLEDGE disgrac'd, and LIBERTY misus'd;
 On *thee* no awful judge incens'd shall sit
 For parts⁴⁹ perverted,⁵⁰ and dishonour'd wit.
 Where ignorance will be found the surest plea,
 How many learn'd and wise shall envy *thee!* 210
 And thou, WHITE SAVAGE! whether lust of gold,
 Or lust of conquest, rule thee uncontrol'd!
 Hero, or robber!—by whatever name
 Thou plead thy impious claim to wealth or fame;
 Whether inferior mischiefs be thy boast, 215
 A petty tyrant rifling Gambia's⁵¹ coast:
 Or bolder carnage track thy crimson⁵² way,
 Kings dispossess'd, and Provinces thy prey;
 Panting to tame wide earth's remotest bound;
 All Cortez⁵³ murder'd, all Columbus⁵⁴ found; 220
 O'er plunder'd realms to reign, detested Lord,
 Make millions wretched, and thyself abhorr'd;—
 In Reason's eye, in Wisdom's fair account,

⁴⁹ Personal quality or attribute.

⁵⁰ Turned away from their natural state.

⁵¹ The Portuguese participated in the slave trade as early as the 15th century in Gambia. It became a British colony in 1765 and was handed to France in 1783.

⁵² Bloody.

⁵³ Spanish conquistador and explorer Hernán Cortéz (c. 1485-1547) murdered Indigenous Aztec peoples in his conquest of Mexico.

⁵⁴ Italian explorer Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) initiated the Atlantic slave trade and is responsible for Indigenous genocide in America.

Your sum of glory boasts a like amount;
 The means may differ, but the end's the same; 225
 Conquest is pillage with a nobler name.
 Who makes the sum of human blessings less,
 Or sinks the stock of general happiness,
 No solid fame shall grace, no true renown,
 His life shall blazon, or his memory crown. 230

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 ruffians who devour:
 Had these possess'd, O COOK!⁵⁵ thy gentle mind, 235
 Thy love of arts, thy love of humankind;
 Had these pursued thy mild and liberal plan,
 DISCOVERERS had not been a curse to man!
 Then, bless'd Philanthropy! thy social hands
 Had link'd dissever'd worlds in brothers bands; 240
 Careless, if colour, or if clime⁵⁶ divide;
 Then, lov'd, and loving, man had liv'd, and died.

The purest wreaths which hang on glory's shrine,
 For empires founded, peaceful PENN!⁵⁷ are thine;
 No blood-stain'd laurels⁵⁸ crown'd thy virtuous toil, 245
 No slaughter'd natives drench'd thy fair-earn'd soil.

⁵⁵ British cartographer and explorer James Cook (1728-1779) charted New Zealand and the east coast of Australia.

⁵⁶ Climate.

⁵⁷ Quaker William Penn (1644-1718) founded the colony of Pennsylvania as a place for religious freedom in America.

⁵⁸ A laurel wreath is a symbol of triumph dating back to Apollo in Greek mythology.

Still thy meek spirit in thy⁵⁹ flock survives,
 Consistent still, *their* doctrines rule their lives;
 Thy followers only have effac'd⁶⁰ the shame 250
 Inscrib'd by SLAVERY on the Christian name.

 Shall Britain, where the soul of Freedom reigns,
 Forge chains for others she herself disdains?
 Forbid it, Heaven! O let the nations know
 The liberty she loves she will bestow; 255
 Not to herself the glorious gift confin'd,
 She spreads the blessing wide as humankind;
 And, scorning narrow views of time and place,
 Bids all be free in earth's extended space.

 What page of human annals⁶¹ can record 260
 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 see, the cherub⁶² Mercy from above,
 Descending softly, quits the sphere of love! 265
 On feeling hearts she sheds celestial 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 bears, exulting, to the burning shore 270

⁵⁹ [More's note] The Quakers have emancipated all their slaves throughout America. [my note] Quakers are a Christian denomination formally known as the Religious Society of Friends or Friends Church, with a strong anti-slavery stance since 1688.

⁶⁰ Erased.

⁶¹ Annual record of events.

⁶² Winged angelic creature often depicted as a baby.

The loveliest office⁶³ Angel ever bore;
 To vindicate the pow'r in Heaven ador'd,
 To still the clank of chains, and sheathe the sword;
 To cheer the mourner, and with soothing hands 275
 From bursting hearts unbind th' Oppressor's bands;
 To raise the lustre of the Christian name,
 And clear the foulest blot that dims its fame.
 As the mild Spirit hovers o'er the coast,
 A fresher hue the wither'd landscapes boast; 280
 Her healing smiles the ruin'd scenes repair,
 And blasted Nature wears a joyous air.
 She spreads her blest commission from above,
 Stamp'd with the sacred characters of love;
 She tears the banner stain'd with blood and tears, 285
 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,⁶⁴
 The chain untouch'd, drops off; the fetter falls. 290
 Astonish'd echo tells the vocal shore,
 Oppression's fall'n, and Slavery is no more!
 The dusky⁶⁵ myriads crowd the sultry plain,
 And hail that mercy long invok'd in vain.
 Victorious Pow'r! she bursts their two-fold bands,⁶⁶ 295
 And FAITH and FREEDOM spring from Mercy's hands.

⁶³ Duty.

⁶⁴ Disgusts.

⁶⁵ Euphemism for Black people.

⁶⁶ Chains or cuffs.



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