Where Sympathy Falls Short: British Evangelical Abolitionism

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During the late eighteenth century, British abolitionists often invoked religion in their rhetoric against the slave trade. Evangelical abolitionists warned that God would impose a providential retribution on all of Britain for its complicity in the ungodly abuses of enslaved Africans. Within their providential language was the appeal to sympathy, namely images of bodily pain. Among the most vocal evangelical abolitionists were poets, such as William Cowper and Anna Laetitia Barbauld. This paper focuses on Cowper's "The Negro's Complaint" (1788) and Barbauld's "Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq., on the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade" (1791). Cowper's and Barbauld's poems embody quintessential features of evangelical abolitionist rhetoric: appeals to Providence and sympathy. In this paper, I will examine how Cowper's and Barbauld's use of providential and sympathetic language advanced the abolitionist cause in the eighteenth century and whether their rhetoric holds up today.

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Introduction

On April 18, 1791, William Wilberforce spoke in front of the House of Commons to introduce a bill abolishing the transatlantic slave trade. According to the Parliamentary Paper published on that day, Wilberforce opposed his fellow MPs' suggestion for "gradual abolition" on the grounds that "The Divine law against murder was absolute and unqualified, and precluded, with him, every consideration of expediency."[1] Wilberforce's speech epitomized the British evangelical abolitionist movement of the late eighteenth century: central to it was its belief in judicial providentialism—that divine Providence would collectively punish Britain for continuing the sins of the slave trade. Within this language of judicial providentialism was the invocation of feeling, present in Wilberforce's opening that stated, "he should not presume to determine what, upon the present occasion were the emotions and sentiments of others."[2]

Evangelical abolitionist poetry, such as William Cowper's "The Negro's Complaint" (1788) and Anna Laetitia Barbauld's "Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq., on the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade" (1791), mirrored Wilberforce's rhetoric. Cowper's "The Negro's Complaint" condemns the dehumanization of enslaved Africans from a slave's perspective. Barbauld's "Epistle" was written in direct response to Parliament's rejection of Wilberforce's bill in 1791. It warns of the unavoidable downfall of the British as a consequence of continuing the slave trade. Both texts condemn the ungodly abuses of the slave trade through their appeals to human sympathy and the religious public's fear of God. What I will argue in this paper is that Cowper's and Barbauld's flawed appeals to sympathy expose the barriers that white abolitionists faced in advocating for enslaved Africans.

Origins of Evangelical Abolitionism

Evangelical abolitionism drew from various features of evangelicalism. Modern scholars follow David Bebbington's definition of evangelicalism—a movement started in 1734 that stresses the Bible, the cross, activism (the preaching of the gospel), and conversion from being a less devout to being a more devout Christian.[3] According to Randall Balmer, evangelicals especially emphasize the conversion principle because it is part of the "born again" experience (being reborn as a more devout Christian) that grants people access to heaven.[4] They see the Bible as "God's revelation to humanity" and are "inclined . . . to interpret the Bible literally."[5] Evangelicalism is not specific to one denomination; rather, it arose in multiple denominations and sects on the common ground of these four principles.[6] Ian M. Randall argues that evangelicalism is a "distinct stream of Christianity" because the "heart" of it is the "lived experience" that requires actively cultivating a "personal relationship with Christ."[7] Evangelicals viewed sin as a form of bondage; they understood the importance of liberation from enslavement because, to them, it resembled liberation from sin. However, unlike later evangelicals like Wilberforce, early evangelicals focused on the Africans' spiritual welfare rather than on abolishing slavery or the slave trade.[8] Few early evangelicals were involved in politics, and they lacked prominence or a unifying structure. During the period from 1788 to 1807, however, many evangelicals gained importance in society and politics.[9] The Clapham Sect—a group of

evangelicals based in Clapham, near London—led the abolitionist movement in Parliament. The Teston Circle—based in Teston, approximately 40 miles southeast of London—shared the evangelicals' concerns over slavery. Wilberforce was involved in both groups, especially the Teston circle. Barham Court, a principal estate in Teston, served as the headquarters for evangelical abolitionism, where Wilberforce and the abolitionist author Hannah More worked until 2 a.m. every night before Wilberforce introduced the first motion for abolition to Parliament in 1789.[10]

Judicial Providentialism in Evangelical Abolitionist Rhetoric

One of the key features of the evangelical movement in the late eighteenth century, driven in part by the aftermath of the American Revolution, was judicial providentialism. Evangelical abolitionists from 1788 to 1807 drew on the concept of judicial providentialism: the belief that God punished and rewarded nations in accordance with their moral character.[11] The American Revolution that began in 1776 and ended in 1783 with a British defeat escalated fears of divine punishment in Britain because many evangelicals, such as Granville Sharp, believed that the unrest in America represented God's punishment for the Britons' continuation of the slave trade. For example, Sharp's *The Law of Retribution* (1776), written shortly after the Americans declared independence, warned of a "severe National Retribution" for "the monstrous load of Guilt which the British subjects, on each side of the Atlantic, have incurred."[12] He argued that God's punishment was "particularly leveled against *Oppressors*, *Tyrants*, and *Slave-holders*!"[13] Sharp's warning of divine punishment on all British people for the slave trade reflected the nature of collective blame in judicial providentialism that circulated Britain.

Cowper and Barbauld were two notable evangelical abolitionist authors whose works embodied judicial providentialism. Cowper was born on November 16, 1731, in Great Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, England, and died on April 25, 1800, in East Dereham, Norfolk. In his works, he wrote about the joys and sorrows of everyday life, using language that was simple compared to that of his contemporaries, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Burns, and William Wordsworth.[14] In 1767, Cowper and his friend Mary Unwin moved to Olney where he met John Newton, who became his close friend. Cowper was inspired by Newton's story of converting to "real Christianity" after working as a slave trader for 11 years. Like Sharp, Cowper saw the American Revolution as a punishment inflicted on the Britons for turning away from God both individually and collectively. Though his *Moral Satires,* written between 1779 and 1782, did not touch on the issue of slavery, they promoted the idea of national guilt by citing Old Testament examples of God punishing sinful nations.[15] Barbauld was a British poet, writer, and editor born on June 20, 1743, in Kibworth Harcourt, Leicestershire, England; she died on March 9, 1825, in Stoke Newington, near London. She lived in Warrington, Lancashire, from the ages of 15 to 30, where her father taught at a Nonconformist Protestant academy. In 1774, she married French Protestant clergyman Rochemont Barbauld. Anna Laetitia Barbauld is known for her hymn "Life! I Know Not What Thou Art" as well as her poems "Corsica" (1768), "The Invitation" (1773), and "Epistle" (1791). She also edited William Collins's *Poetical Works* (1794) and later wrote introductions to a fifty-volume series of iconic British novels, *The British Novelists* (1810).[16]

Cowper's and Barbauld's Use of Judicial Providentialism

Cowper's "The Negro's Complaint" embodies judicial providentialism because it predicts a divine punishment of the British for the slave trade. In "The Negro's Complaint," Cowper warns of divine punishment in the form of a natural disaster:

> "Hark! He answers!—Wild tornadoes
> Strewing yonder sea with wrecks,
> Wasting towns, plantations, meadows,
> Are the voice with which he speaks.
> He, foreseeing what vexations
> Afric's sons should undergo,
> Fixed their tyrants' habitations
> Where his whirlwinds answer—'No.'"[17]

Cowper grounds his image of the divine punishment in nature, characteristic of late-eighteenth-century evangelicalism. In the wake of "the Great Enlightenment Earthquake Controversy" of the 1750s, many late-eighteenth-century evangelicals viewed natural disasters as signs of divine intentions.[18] For example, Cowper's *The Task* (1785), written after Britain's 1783 defeat in the American Revolution, portrays the Sicilian earthquake of 1783 and other similar natural disasters as "frowning signals" that "bespeak / Displeasure in his breast who smites the earth."[19] In "The Negro's Complaint," Cowper attributes "Wild tornadoes" to God, confirming that "He answers" to the "vexations / Afric's sons should undergo." He characterizes this punishment as inevitable because it is "Fixed" and aimed at "their tyrants' habitations."[20] Cowper's depiction of God using "Wild tornadoes" and "whirlwinds" to punish the British for the slaves' "vexations" aligns with the evangelical belief that God used nature to punish immoral nations.

Barbauld's "Epistle" similarly warns of a divine punishment for the Britons' immorality in the slave trade. In "Epistle," Barbauld foretells the slaves' revenge on Britain for the slave trade:

> "In Britain's senate, Misery's pangs give birth
> To jests unseemingly, and to horrid mirth–
> Forbear!–thy virtues but provoke our doom,
> And swell th' account of vengeance yet to come;
> For, not unmarked in Heaven's impartial plan,
> Shall man, proud worm, contemn his fellow-man?
> And injur'd Afric, by herself redrest,
> Darts her own serpents at her Tyrant's breast.
> Each vice, to minds deprav'd by bondage known,
> With sure contagion fastens on his own;
> In sickly languors melts his nerveless frame,
> 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 uncontroul'd desire,
> Sears the young heart to images of woe,
> And blasts the buds of Virtue as they blow."[21]

Barbauld's warning that Providence would punish Britain for its national immorality reflects the evangelical abolitionists' implication of all Britons in the slave trade. The evangelicals' rationale for blaming Britain as a whole was that every Briton was responsible for the slave trade.[22] Although Barbauld acknowledges that Parliament is where "Misery's pangs give birth / To jests unseemly, and to horrid mirth," the voting public's choice to elect the MPs who continue this evil makes its members just as immoral as Parliament. Therefore, her juxtaposition of "Misery" with "jests" and "mirth" conveys the sadism of both the MPs and the people who elected them, suggesting that they take pleasure in continuing the abuses of the slave trade. Barbauld's characterization of British minds as "deprav'd by bondage known" supports the evangelicals' blame of all Britons for the slave trade: while only a few adult men voted for the MPs who rejected Wilberforce's bill, all Britons were corrupted by slavery because they indulged in the products of the slave trade.[23] The phrase "bondage known" conveys the Britons' willful perpetuation of the slave trade that they "know" is horrific, as they have heard Wilberforce's protests. The reason why they continue trafficking slaves is that slavery "Sears the young heart to images of woe": the Britons' hearts become hardened as they become accustomed to abusing their slaves.[24] The word "Sears" refers to both the Britons' desensitization as well as the branding of slaves; through this double meaning, Barbauld illustrates how the same act of cruelty burns slaves, slave traders, and consumers of the slave trade. This motif of burning extends throughout "Epistle" as Barbauld criticizes the Britons' "Avarice" and "impetuous Passion's flame," which is what precisely "Sears the young heart."[25] She then goes on to call Britain a "voluptuous" and "shameless" nation.[26] Barbauld's description of Britain as "voluptuous" and "Sear[ed]" by "impetuous Passion's flame" implies that the Britons' overwhelming emotion, probably greed or gluttony, has replaced their dignity with self-indulgence.[27] This assertion aligns with the evangelicals' argument that Britons prioritized indulging their desires for slave-produced goods over their morality.

The Eighteenth-Century Concept of Sympathy

The couching of judicial providentialism in the language of bodily suffering brings it together with the developing concept of sympathy. According to Amit S. Rai, during the eighteenth century, there was an increasing concern with sympathy and the contemplation of pain and pleasure.[28] Sympathy in the eighteenth century was named a "relation between two bodily organs or parts such that disorder, or any condition, of the one, induces a corresponding condition in the other."[29] This concept of sympathy grounded its traditional definition—a connection in which certain things affect each other—in the body.[30] Abolitionist discourses often involved scenes of suffering and the pained body; the body tied sensations of pain to the "sympathetic response."[31] Markman Ellis argues that sentimentalists' fascination with pain and suffering formed the moral foundation of the abolitionist movement.[32] Methodist preacher John Wesley's *Considerations Upon Slavery* (1774) ties together sympathy, the body, and evangelical morality: "Are you *a man*? Then you should have a *human* heart...Do you feel no relenting now? If you do not, you must go on, till the measure of your iniquities is full. Then will the great GOD deal with *you*, as you have dealt with *them*, and require all their blood at your hands...."[33] Wesley's statement that "*a man*" should have a "*human* heart" names the heart as the organ of sympathy. He integrates rhetoric of bodily pain with judicial providentialism in warning that "the great GOD" will "require all their [the slaves'] blood at your [the Britons'] hands." Similarly, Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano, former slaves who chronicled their experiences, used the language of suffering to morally obligate readers to sympathize with enslaved Africans. In *Thoughts and Sentiments* (1787), Cugoano vividly describes the "bloody whip" that "lath[es]" the "naked bodies" of slaves to convince readers of the evils of the slave trade.[34] In *Interesting Narrative* (1789), Equiano recounts his suffering as a slave and ends with a demand for "sympathy for the wants and miseries of [his] sable brethren."[35]

Sympathetic Language in "The Negro's Complaint" and "Epistle"

Cowper's sympathetic language in "The Negro's Complaint" highlights the suffering of the enslaved. Cowper writes "The Negro's Complaint" from a slave's perspective and combines religious and bodily language to convey the grievances of the enslaved. For example, his speaker asks, "Why did all-creating nature / Make the plant for which we toil?"[36] The word "toil" conveys the physically painful labor that slaves had to do, and the speaker's question of why God would make slaves suffer like this aims to draw sympathy by appealing to faith. Cowper further emphasizes the immorality of the slave trade when he implores the British to "Think how many backs have smarted / For your sweets the cane affords."[37] His use of the word "your" in "your sweets" directly blames the Britons' desire for sugar on the pain caused to the "backs" that "have smarted." The juxtaposition of "sweets" with the image of slaves' "backs...smart[ing]" appeals to the senses of taste and touch, respectively, to show the consequence of Britons indulging in sugar. The alliteration of "smarted" and "sweets" creates unity and establishes a causal relationship between the demand for sugar and the abuses involved in meeting that demand. Cowper creates a similarly unified contrast through the dual meaning of "cane" which symbolizes both sugarcane and the whips used on enslaved Africans, adding to the juxtaposition of sweetness and pain.

In contrast, Barbauld's sympathetic language centers on the painful effects of divine punishment on the Britons. Barbauld foretells of a rebellion where "injur'd Afric... / Darts her own serpents at her Tyrant's breast." She warns that the British "worm" will pale in comparison to the African "serpents" whose "fiery venom gains / The milky innocence of infant veins." Barbauld offers no solution to this grim fate because the Britons' "doom" is part of "Heaven's impartial plan." Barbauld emphasizes the impending "doom" of the British in three ways: contrasting the grandeur of the African "serpent" with the diminutiveness of the British "worm," infantilizing the British, and surrendering the Britons' agency to Providence. Barbauld's use of the words "innocence," "infant," and "milky" (which is suggestive of breast-feeding), as well as her subjection of the British to "Heaven's impartial plan," portrays the British as helpless infants unable to defend themselves from Providence. Her inclusion of "infant[s]" in the divine punishment intertwines her sympathetic language with judicial providentialism because it emphasizes that even newborn Britons carry the sins of the slave trade. Through her depiction of the "fiery venom gain[ing] / The milky innocence of infant veins," Barbauld combines the vulnerability of the British "infant" with the pain of the body

absorbing the venom after a snake bite, making what Rai calls a "classic scene of sympathy: spectacle, gaze, suffering, representation, and call."[38]

Initial Reception of "The Negro's Complaint" and "Epistle"

Barbauld's invocation of slavery's danger for British national wellbeing represents a broader evangelical abolitionist appeal to nationalism along with the religious rhetoric. In January 1788, for example, the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade published a call to arms in every major newspaper to make abolition a national cause, which led to the House of Commons receiving more than 100 petitions for abolition.[39] Therefore, the Society's work attached a patriotic appeal to the abolitionist movement.[40] Cowper's "The Negro's Complaint" was received enthusiastically for fueling this patriotic appeal. Cowper set "The Negro's Complaint" to the tune of *Admiral Hosier's Ghost*, a war ballad composed from 1739-1740 during England's war with Spain. British audiences viewed this musical choice as restorative to British patriotism following the American Revolution; they saw Cowper's poem as part of the unification of Britons under the antislavery cause that reinforced their national identity.[41] In Christopher Leslie Brown's words, "The men and women who gave life to this movement originated the campaign in the process of pursuing a variety of ends, to cleanse their society of sin and corruption, to renew its power and dignity, or to prove themselves holy or worthy or brave."[42] To British abolitionists, Cowper's religious and patriotic appeal epitomized their multifaceted goal.

In contrast to the acclaim for Cowper's poem, abolitionists' praise of Barbauld's "Epistle" focused on its grounding in the slave trade's effect on the British. In the post-Cugoano and Equiano era, British audiences were used to hearing abolitionists condemn the brutality of the slave trade. Graphic depictions of slavery stopped resonating with them because they were frequently exposed to those images, which was why Wilberforce's 1791 speech did not sway the MPs. Barbauld recognizes this effect in "Epistle" when she says that the Britons' "hearts" are "Sear[ed]...to images of woe"; therefore, she focuses her poem on the harms that providential retribution would inflict on the British because it is the only way to resonate with them. This method of criticizing the slave trade wielded rhetorical significance because its unusual angle, coupled with its sympathetic and providentialist language, made abolition a more pressing cause for the British. Abolitionist authors recognized the literary power of Barbauld's British-oriented perspective: for example, in a letter to Barbauld about "Epistle," Hannah More praised Barbauld for "writing so well, for writing on a subject so near to my heart, and for addressing it to one so every way worthy of your highest esteem."[43] In *Women, Dissent, & Anti-Slavery in Britain & America*, Elizabeth J. Clapp, Julie Roy Jeffrey, and other historians recognize the reception of Barbauld's "Epistle" from her contemporaries, like More, as representative of the power of women Dissenters using their faith to challenge slavery through literature.[44]

A Modern Critique of Cowper's and Barbauld's Poems

While the enthusiastic response to "The Negro's Complaint" showed the power of abolitionist poetry in the eighteenth century, today, Cowper's choice to write from a slave's perspective as a white man demonstrates shortcomings in his advocacy for slaves. As a white British man, Cowper takes on the role of an enslaved African in writing "The Negro's Complaint." According to Lynn Festa, at the time of its publication, orators reciting the poem were most likely to be white and British. Festa writes, "The invitation...to 'be' the slave for the space of a song...asserts a possible equity or exchange between the intradiegetic and extradiegetic speakers of the poem. And yet the British speaker must confront the knowledge that his or her place is more properly with the accused 'you' rather than with the accusing 'I.'"[45] When the British orator complains on behalf of Cowper's enslaved speaker, thereby temporarily assuming the role of an enslaved African without shedding their British identity, they are essentially acting. This tension within the orator's identity raises the question of whom the grief belongs to because the orator juggles between their own identity and the enslaved speaker's.[46] Because the British orator is not an enslaved African, the most that they can do is act as one for the duration of the poem; they cannot transform themself into a slave. Since the orator can only pretend to be a slave for a momentary performance, Cowper's choice to write from a slave's perspective fails to create a speaker who truly embodies the enslaved experience.

The treatment of "The Negro's Complaint" as an acting performance exemplifies Festa's overarching claim that white abolitionists who tried to use sympathy to convey the horrors of the slave trade nonetheless ended up objectifying enslaved Africans. For example, when testifying in front of the House of Commons, the surgeon of the slave ship *Brookes*, Dr. Trotter, said that he saw slaves "drawing their breath with all those laborious and anxious efforts for life, which is observed in expiring animals...crying out, 'Kickeraboo, kickeraboo.'"[47] Despite his attempts to draw sympathy through the phrases "laborious and anxious efforts for life" and "crying out," Trotter's reduction of slaves to "expiring animals" that call out "kickeraboo" dehumanizes them in the same manner that slave traders did.

Although Cowper avoids Trotter's animalization by recognizing the "human feelings" of enslaved Africans, his choice to title his poem "The Negro's Complaint" inadvertently objectifies them.[48] The word "The" rather than "A" makes the speaker assume the identity of all Africans rather than acknowledging himself as one individual, which characterizes Africans as one homogenous race. In contrast, Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments* and Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* emphasize their unique experiences as enslaved Africans; as a result, their stories feel human because they are personal to them. While Cowper recognizes the "human feelings" of enslaved Africans, his characterization of Africans as a single mass of people erases slaves' individuality, depersonalizing their suffering.

Similarly, while Barbauld's centering of her sympathetic rhetoric on the Britons' suffering was powerful in eighteenth-century Britain, from a modern perspective, the grounding of her argument in British self-interest displays her struggle to advocate for slaves themselves. Barbauld's comparison of "bondage" to the "deprav[ement]" of the British mind equates the physical pain inflicted on enslaved Africans to the collapse of British morality, erasing the distinct nature of the Africans' suffering. Unlike other abolitionists, like Cugoano and Equiano who provide evocative images of African suffering, Barbauld emphasizes the pain of British bodies absorbing the venom of African serpents during a slave revolt. Thus, her sympathetic appeal to the religious public's

fear of God is grounded in the threat that a collective divine punishment poses to the Britons' self-interest. Rather than trying to make the public feel sympathy toward the pain of enslaved Africans, Barbauld appeals to their fear of the deep pain that Providence would inflict on them. Barbauld's inability to center her rhetoric on slaves reflects her background as a white woman who could not have fully understood the magnitude of suffering that slaves endured. While Barbauld's focus on the Britons' pain was fitting for a time when Britons were numbed to the horrors of slavery, from a modern point of view, her failure to advocate for slaves themselves, alongside Cowper's failure to recognize enslaved Africans as individuals, reflects how white abolitionists struggled to precisely represent the experiences of the enslaved.

Footnotes

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[45] Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 163. In this quote, the "British speaker" that Festa refers to is the orator of the poem, not Cowper's enslaved African speaker.

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