

British slaves and Barbary

Speaking at the Putney debates between the army grandees and the agitators in 1647, John Wildman declared ‘Our case is to be considered thus, that we have been under slavery. That’s acknowledged by all.’ Though it was far from acknowledged by all, Colonel Thomas Rainborough agreed that the domination of wealthy landowners left ‘the greatest part of the nation enslaved’. Ten years earlier, Rainborough’s father William had led an expedition to Salé, the Moroccan corsair base, on a mission to free hundreds of Englishmen enslaved there by the Moors. Thomas had accompanied him, and so had encountered slavery in its literal sense too- in the context of white, not black slavery.

Roughly 20,000 British people were enslaved in Barbary in the early modern period. While this was a very small fraction of the European total, which exceeded a million, it meant that in the 16th and 17th centuries most contemporaries would have associated slavery with the white victims of the Barbary Moors and Turks rather than the American slave-trade. Most British slaves were sailors captured at sea or their passengers (Henrietta Maria’s dwarf, the earl of Inchiquin, and a governor of Carolina among them). Others had been seized in raids on coastal communities in the south-west or Ireland. Some English slaves were eventually ransomed and returned home to tell their stories, and beg for alms. For a whole century English slavery thus remained a high profile issue, with nation-wide charitable collections, petitions, naval expeditions, pamphlets, ballads and even plays. Philip Massinger’s drama *The Renegado* (c.1625), which focused on an elite Venetian lady, also featured an English slave, a eunuch in the seraglio at Tunis.

One striking feature of the Barbary story is that no one drew the (to us) obvious parallel between the sufferings of white slaves in Barbary and of black Africans transported to America. No one writing about Barbary in the 17th century argued that slavery was intrinsically wrong. The Spaniards, French, Italians and Maltese had large numbers of Moorish galley-slaves in their fleets, and though the English did not, they were happy to sell captured Moors into slavery in Spain or Italy. Slavery was accepted throughout the Mediterranean as a fact of life, outrageous only for one’s own countrymen and women. The white slaves in Morocco were supervised and brutally disciplined by black African overseers, slaves themselves but several rungs higher, and it is at least possible that this served to harden European attitudes to the African slave-trade.

Campaigners pressing for the abolition of the African slave-trade in the late 18th century were conscious that white slavery still survived in Barbary. The exotic ‘Society of Knights Liberators of the White Slaves of Africa’ demanded action, and in 1816 shamed the British government into sending a fleet to Algiers to crush the corsairs forever. A massive bombardment destroyed much of the city, the slaves were freed, and corsair operations finally ceased. The commander of the expedition, Admiral Sir Thomas Pellew, was one of the Knights Liberators and also a collateral descendant of Thomas Pellow, who a century earlier had endured over twenty years as a slave in Morocco.

Figurative use of the language of slavery was very often associated with personal or domestic relationships. Gertrude Savile, a spinster dependent on a wealthy brother who openly humiliated her, wailed in 1728 that ‘I am the most abject Slave and must not speak or think’. Philip Massinger used the term in a variety of contexts in his comedy *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*. Welborne, a gentleman fallen on hard times, damns an insolent alehouse-keeper as rascal, slave, dog and rogue, ‘slave’ signifying base in both character and degree. He also rounds on the servants of the play’s villain, the rich and grasping Sir Giles Overreach: ‘why you slaves, /Created only to make legges, and cringe’. They are servile as well as base. Overreach sees them in similar terms, and when one dares to ask why he treats them with such contempt, replies: ‘Cause, slave? why I am angrie,/And thou a subject only fit for beating,/ And so to coole my choler’. Margaret, his unhappy young daughter, feels similarly crushed, lamenting that he ‘slaves me to his will’. But Massinger also employed the terminology in a more positive sense. Overreach is a social climber and wants to marry Margaret to the elderly Lord Lovell, offering a huge dowry as bait, but when she confides to Lovell that she is in love with another, he generously promises to help the young couple outwit her father and marry. Overjoyed, she declares, ‘So shall your Honour save two lives, and bind us /Your slaves for ever’. ‘Slavery’ here signifies a condition to be welcomed; she will be his devoted servant, eager to repay his kindness. Margaret’s use of the term also brings us somewhat closer to the more common figurative context of amatory discourse, with poets and letter-writers professing themselves ‘enslaved’ by the beauty of the beloved. By contrast, we find Samuel Pepys using the language of slavery in the very different and strikingly modern context of work. Reorganising his office in 1668, he hoped to turn it into ‘an office of ease, and not slavery, as it hath for so many years been’.

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