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The Poetics of Radical Abolitionism: Ann Yearsley's *Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade*

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ABSTRACT: This article re-examines Ann Yearsley's Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade (1788) and argues that excessive attention to the relationship between Yearsley and her former patron Hannah More has obscured the extent to which Yearsley was working independently by 1788, albeit influenced by the burgeoning literature of antislavery. The article shows how interest in the More-Yearsley rivalry has been expressed in critical literature and biography from the 1930s to the present day, generally in the form of compare-and-contrast close readings of both poems in which Yearsley's poetic vision is subordinated to More's. It then provides a close reading of Yearsley's poem to show how it is in dialogue with a range of antislavery verse, including poems by Thomas Chatterton, John Bicknell and Thomas Day, William Cowper, and William Roscoe. The article concludes with an assessment of More's radical abolitionism and the suggestion that Yearsley's influence, as well as her influences, be the subject of future study.

A great deal of recent work on Ann Yearsley has focused on establishing a reputation for her as an important poet of the late eighteenth century who bears comparison not only with other laboring-class poets but also with the most exalted writers of the age. Among others, J. M. S. Tompkins, Donna Landry, Moira Ferguson, Mary Waldron, and Kerri Andrews, in their different ways, have succeeded in bringing Yearsley to scholarly attention and to varying extents have engaged with her poetry as well as establishing the details of her life. Their work belongs, however, to what we might think of as an archaeological phase of Yearsley criticism, in which criticism and analysis has often taken second place to uncovering the details of her life and work.

In particular, many scholars have focused on the details or implications of Yearsley's relationship with Hannah More; as is well known, Yearsley's poetic career had started under More's patronage, but the pair fell out over More's plans to invest the proceeds of Yearsley's writing. As a consequence, Yearsley's life has often been given more attention than her work, and many of Yearsley's poems have never been examined in detail, either on their own terms or in relation to other poetic works and traditions. Now that Yearsley's biography is well-established and her reputation more secure, the way forward must be to reach more deeply into the poems themselves to better understand not only Yearsley's method and poetic vision but also the part she played in the wider poetic culture of the late eighteenth century.

A case in point is Yearsley's thirty-page *Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade*, which was issued in London in February 1788. It tells the story of "Indian Luco," betrayed into slavery, who attempts to murder an overseer, fails, attempts suicide by drowning, fails again, and is captured and burned to death. This poem is by no means unknown to modern scholars, but rather than focus on the poem in its own right, most critics have been more interested in exploring its relationship with More's *Slavery, a Poem* (1788), which More had written at the invitation of the newly formed Society for Effecting the Abolition of the African Slave Trade. The two poems appeared about two years after their authors had fallen out and were published almost simultaneously. More's poem appeared on 8 February 1788 in London while Yearsley's was advertised in Bristol on 9 February, presumably being published a few days later.¹ The coincidence of timing and topic in two works by poets who had until recently been so closely connected naturally invites comparison between the two poems. Critics have also observed both poems' use of a rhetoric of sensibility, although often stressing More's rationalism in contrast to Yearsley's emotionalism. The contrast was made from the start. Waldron notes that the two

poems were immediately reviewed side by side in *The Monthly Review* (p. 169), while Andrews has shown that a verse comparison between “More’s polish’d muse” and “Yearsley’s muse of fire” appeared in *The Bristol Gazette* in May 1788 (p. 89). Modern Yearsley scholarship probably dates from Tompkins’s 1938 essay on “The Bristol Milkwoman” and here this critical procedure is replicated. Tompkins claims that her essay “deals with Ann Yearsley . . . not with Hannah More,” but this is not really true.² Throughout, the Yearsley-More rivalry is a central theme. Tompkins even suggests that “it must have been in conscious rivalry that [Yearsley] published her poem on *The Inhumanity of the Slave-Trade* within a few months of Miss More’s *Slavery*” (p. 77). In fact, the timing was on the scale of days, not months, and Tompkins has no evidence for this “conscious rivalry.” Nevertheless, later scholars uniformly perpetuate the idea, either explicitly or implicitly by comparing and contrasting the two poems. In 1942, for example, in his ground-breaking but problematic survey of eighteenth-century antislavery literature, Wylie Sypher took note of the “the rhapsodical Anne Yearsley” who offers “not only the pathetic, but also the terrific.”³ His assessment is dismissive, especially when he invokes Yearsley to diminish the achievement of Ignatius Sancho (1729-80), the African writer and composer: “to bluestockings who found genius in milkwomen,” Sypher argues, Sancho “must have seemed a convincing instance of natural talent” (p. 149). The “bluestocking” is of course Hannah More.

By the 1990s, almost all discussion of Yearsley’s *Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade* took the form of a compare-and-contrast exercise. Landry’s 1990 analysis is situated within a longer discussion of Phillis Wheatley and is sceptical of Tompkins’s claim that the poems derived from conscious rivalry between More and Yearsley, but it is nevertheless almost poetic itself in the series of parallelisms and antitheses it offers to compare the two texts.⁴ Landry’s analysis locks the poem into dialogue with More, inadvertently perpetuating the

impression she initially tried to dispel that the two poems arose from conscious rivalry. Writing two years later, Ferguson presented the rivalry in historical rather than personal terms. Making much of Yearsley's representation of Luco as a slave in open rebellion and arguing that More and Yearsley had "acrimoniously severed their relationship as a result of class conflict," Ferguson stresses their class differences, arguing that while More "condemns the 'mob,' Yearsley exhorts Africans and all disenfranchised people to resist."⁵ This representation of Yearsley as a class-warrior is somewhat overblown, but it is certainly true that positive depictions of rebellious slaves were unusual in the period, something that is discussed in more detail later in this article. Ferguson's assessment is, however, essentially biographical, analysing Yearsley's relationship with More rather than reading her poetry on its own terms. Likewise, Mary Waldron's 1996 treatment of the poem is brief, factual, and mostly given over to reproducing contemporary reviews. As with Ferguson, the contrast with More is central—almost half of Waldron's discussion of Yearsley's *Poem* is given over to More, contrasting More's "stately couplets" with Yearsley's dramatic blank verse, which she argues is often "much more the effect of the imagination" (pp. 168, 171).

By the start of the twenty first century, Yearsley's *Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade* was familiar to scholars of abolitionism and began to be anthologized. Despite offering a lengthy extract, James Basker's notes on Yearsley are minimal, and he dismissively includes her under a list of women poets "whose names are completely unfamiliar."⁶ Marcus Wood offers a more substantial, if problematic, assessment. Noting that "slavery had suddenly become a 'hot' publishing area," he claims that "Yearsley would also have been aware that More was writing her own major verse treatment of the subject."⁷ This is possible, but Wood offers no evidence to support the claim. Like Ferguson, Wood reads the poem as class conflict and takes sides himself,

arguing that “Yearsley’s poem is a slap in the face for the kind of pious platitudes in which More specializes [and] a veiled assault on the social values which More, despite her sentimental forays into abolition, sought to protect” (p. 120). Yet again, the poem is seen as a move in the Yearsley-More rivalry, and Yearsley’s independent achievement is elided, albeit no doubt unintentionally. The most recent substantial work to examine the poem is Andrews’s 2013 *Ann Yearsley and Hannah More, Patronage and Poetry: The Story of a Literary Relationship*. This is a detailed, scholarly, and persuasive account of the relationship between the two authors but, as the title clearly shows, the central purpose of the book is to examine the two together. Andrews pays particular attention to the contrast between More’s polite appeals to Parliament and Yearsley’s appeal to the city of Bristol. In Andrews’s view, while “More speaks respectfully to the MPs, imploring them to deliver the golden future she conjures for the country. Yearsley excoriates them, her mocking tone delivering a bitterly ironic challenge” (p. 92). This means that “Change for Yearsley can occur only at the local level, with the implication that the nation is too corrupt, too involved in unjust practices upon its own citizens, to be able to combat slavery” (p. 93). Andrews’s analysis brings together and builds upon two centuries of criticism of the poem, foregrounding especially its radical localism, but her reading nonetheless continues the tradition of reading the poem primarily in the context of Yearsley’s relationship with More.

This essay begins with the Yearsley-More rivalry but hopes to move beyond it to a deeper understanding of the poem on Yearsley’s own terms and a more thorough intertextual examination of Yearsley’s possible influences. These influences turn out to be more various than has been noted before, with More a less central figure than is usually believed. The clues are in the poems themselves, which, as we have seen, many critics have found to be quite different in style, conception, and even geography. The main action of Yearsley’s *Poem on the Inhumanity*

of the Slave Trade takes place in an unspecified and clearly imagined colonial location, but the poem begins and ends in Bristol: Yearsley's birthplace and a centre of the eighteenth-century Atlantic slave trade. More's *Slavery* does not mention Bristol once even though More was one of the city's best-known literary figures. This striking difference between the two poems is only one of several that suggests they had separate inceptions and fulfilled different roles in the two poets' careers. Indeed, I argue that to see Yearsley's intervention in the antislavery debate solely in terms of her relationship with More overlooks the extent to which Yearsley was independently responding to and furthering the national political and literary debates of the late 1780s, as well as responding to local concerns in her native city. We should, I suggest, no longer read the poem primarily in the context of the rivalry with More but more in the context of the burgeoning tradition of abolitionist verse. Accordingly, in this essay I show that Yearsley responds to antislavery verse by William Cowper, William Roscoe, and Thomas Chatterton to produce a poem that is rooted in her personal experience in Bristol yet fully and independently engaged with the broader concerns and literature of the abolition movement.

The Poem in Context: Bristol and the Abolition Movement

More and Yearsley's troubled relationship was played out against a backdrop of increasing public concern about the ability of the government to manage what was left of its empire, and the existence of these poems shows that both writers clearly had strong views on this political controversy. The 1780s had not started well. The humiliating defeat of the British in North America had plunged the country into political crisis, and while the ministry of William Pitt had restored stability, there was an increasing concern in the public mind that management of the British colonies was both cruel and corrupt. At the same time, political discourses of all sorts

were increasingly widely available by the 1780s and far more people participated in public political debate or were at least consumers of political discourse. In part, this was a result of the 1771 Printers Case in which the newspapers had secured the right to publish accounts of the debates in the House of Commons. Defeat in the war with America and the political crisis that followed had also catapulted a new generation of media-savvy politicians into power, led by the symbolically youthful Younger Pitt. It was in this context that public pressure over colonial mismanagement became increasingly insistent. On 21 May 1787, the Governor-General of India, Warren Hastings, was arrested on corruption charges. The next day, a group of men, mostly Quakers, formed the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the African Slave Trade (SEAAST). Although the two events were not directly related, both clearly emerged from a widespread sense that the British Empire needed reform.

The Warren Hastings impeachment trial turned into the most famous political trial of the eighteenth century. During the same period, SEAAST engineered the first modern political pressure campaign. This equally media-savvy campaign, led in Parliament by the great friend of Pitt and More, the famously eloquent William Wilberforce, was promoted up and down the country by legions of letter writers, sermonizers, songwriters, novelists, and poets. Poetry had emerged as a key abolitionist weapon in the 1770s when John Bicknell and Thomas Day had published *The Dying Negro* (1773), a long poem written in response to the 1771 Somerset Case in which Lord Mansfield had ruled that English law did not give slaveholders the right to compel their slaves to leave the country against their will. This ruling effectively ended legal slavery in England although, as Bicknell and Day's poem made clear, illegal slavery continued. The poem did much to mobilize early antislavery sentiment and showed that poetry would be a crucial resource. Accordingly, one of SEAAST's first acts was to commission a group of poems from

their supporters Roscoe, More, and Cowper, all of which appeared in due course, in most cases making much use of a fashionable sentimental rhetoric. Once the tone had been set, each year saw the publication of dozens of unofficial abolitionist poems—as was almost certainly the intention.⁸

It is likely, therefore, that had Yearsley not fallen out with More, or had she come to prominence through some other route not involving More, that she would have jumped on the abolitionist bandwagon. It certainly is possible that the rivalry with More affected both the timing and the content of Yearsley's poem to some extent, although we have no evidence either way. Even if we assume that Yearsley was writing in a conscious attempt to upstage More, however, this underestimates both the prevalence of abolitionist discourse in 1788 and Yearsley's developing ability to tap into the national mood. It also accuses Yearsley of hypocrisy. If her *Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade* is little more than a gobbet of rivalry wrapped up in a cloak of sentimental humanitarianism, her motive for opposing slavery is merely self-interested; her tears of sympathy for the enslaved no more than crocodile tears. Yet these are exactly the terms by which Yearsley condemns the hypocrisy of those Bristol traders who shamefully defended slave trading with false religion and false sensibility:

vap'rous sighs and tears,

Which, like the guileful crocodile's, oft fall,

Nor fall, but at the cost of human bliss.⁹

Yearsley is not only alerting the reader to the hypocrisy of Bristol's slave traders and their defenders but is also asserting the integrity of her own poetic ethos. This assertion can be seen as a statement of her independence from More, of course, but rejections of false sensibility of this type were in fact widespread in the literature of antislavery. More was among those poets who

explicitly challenged false sensibility, both in *Slavery* and in her earlier *Sensibility, A Poem* (1780), and to that extent Yearsley's argument echoes More's. As the remainder of this essay shows, however, in general Yearsley's slavery poem owes very little to More's.

The crocodile tears passage is a good example. Unlike More's *Slavery*, in which Bristol is absent, this verse paragraph begins with an address to Bristol and with a declaration that, though the poet may be distant, she maintains a close attachment to the city: "Yet, Bristol, list! nor deem Lactilla's soul / Lessen'd by distance" (p. 2). This declaration also implies that Yearsley is capable of feeling for the plight of Africans even though she is at a great distance from them; a sense borne out by the following lines in which she asks that her "crude ideas . . . fly in wide expansion" until "Nature moves / Obedient to her voice" (p. 2). This double meaning is typical of her approach in this poem, but the attachment to Bristol could not be made more explicit than in the opening and closing lines of the poem—indeed, the opening and closing words. The poem begins:

BRISTOL, thine heart hath throbb'd to glory.—Slaves,
E'en Christian slaves, have shook their chains, and gaz'd
With wonder and amazement on thee. (p. 1)

The opening is a carefully controlled but deeply ambivalent address to the poet's native city. The word "Bristol" is a trochee, the reverse of the expected iamb. The falling rhythm of this opening disyllable and the way it is marked off with a comma gives the word a thoughtful, introspective tone that ironizes the notion that the city's "heart hath throbb'd to glory." Any such perceived glory is in any case powerfully undercut by the strongly stressed and demarcated final word of the line: "slaves." The abrupt interpolation of this powerful word provides such effective contrast that we are compelled to think also of the contrast to glory, which is shame. The "wonder and

amazement” with which enslaved people gaze on Bristol in the third line thus takes on two meanings. Both Bristol’s glory and her shame are the cause of this amazement. Yearsley’s opening lines simultaneously praise and damn her home city and this tension is not resolved until the last lines of the poem. Here, Yearsley concludes with an apostrophe to “social love” (p. 28). This “gentle angel” has the power “to banish Inhumanity” through the power of “sympathy unseen” (pp. 28, 29). This is a standard sentimental argument, ultimately deriving from the work of moral sense philosophers such as David Hume and Adam Smith but much used by abolitionist writers. Yearsley ends by asking the personified “social love” to:

touch the soul of man;
Subdue him; make a fellow-creature’s woe
His own by heart-felt sympathy, whilst wealth
Is made subservient to his soft disease.

And when thou hast to high perfection wrought
This mighty work, say, “*such is Bristol’s soul.*” (p. 30)

Ultimately, it seems, a personified Bristol is good at heart, but the “heart” of the poem’s opening line that “throbb’d to glory” needs to be transformed by social love in order to save the city’s soul. The poem thus concludes as a unified and controlled critique of Bristol’s part in the slave trade, the story of Luco framed by the possibility of Bristol’s shame being transformed to glory by the action of social love.

Cowper, Roscoe, and Abolitionist Blank Verse

If Bristol is at the heart of Yearsley’s *Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade*, by contrast, it is a notable absence from More’s *Slavery*. The poem differs from Yearsley’s in

several other formal respects. In the first place, while Yearsley's poem is essentially a narrative of the life and death of Luco, framed by the address to Bristol, More's *Slavery* is miscellaneous and episodic with no central narrative. Yearsley's poem is thus more coherently organized than More's and seems more genuinely engaged both with Bristol as a location and with injustice as a theme. More's poem lacks rootedness, and although it covers a great deal of ground, it cannot rid itself of a rather stiffly intellectual and patrician tone. This tone is established in part by More's choice of the rhyming couplet, which allies the poem with the erudite but aristocratic tradition of John Dryden and Alexander Pope. Yearsley's is in blank verse, which lends the poem a less formal, more naturalistic air and invites a more personal emotional response from the reader. There are wider intertextual implications as well. Blank verse is relatively unusual in earlier abolitionist poetry, most of which is in rhyming couplets. In fact, there are only two important antislavery poems in blank verse that Yearsley could have drawn on. The first is a short section in Cowper's celebrated work *The Task*, which had appeared in 1784. The second is the first book of Roscoe's *The Wrongs of Africa*, which was published in 1787 and is clearly inspired by Yearsley's own favorite, *Paradise Lost* (1667).

It seems unlikely that Yearsley was ignorant of these two poems and it must, therefore, be significant that in the final pages of her poem, she considers a legal argument that had featured prominently in the poems by Cowper and Roscoe. Following the death of Luco, but shortly before the apostrophe to social love, Yearsley notes that, under English law, "the meagre thief" who "steals a slender sum" is hanged while "the wretch who makes another's life his prey" is protected (pp. 26, 27) She asks:

Is this an English law, whose guidance fails

When crimes are swell'd to magnitude so vast,

That *Justice* dare not scan them? Or does *Law*
Bid *Justice* an eternal distance keep
From England's great tribunal, when the slave
Calls loud on *Justice only*? Speak, ye few
Who fill Britannia's senate, and are deem'd
The fathers of your country! Boast your laws,
Defend the *honour* of a land so fall'n,
That Fame from ev'ry battlement is flown,
And Heathens start, e'en at a Christian's name. (pp. 27-28)

Yearsley here transcends the merely local and appeals directly to Parliament to change the law—something which many critics have overlooked. She was not alone. The argument that England's domestic law was inconsistent with its colonial law had often been made by poets, pamphleteers, and politicians. It had most famously been stated in abolitionist verse in Cowper's long poem *The Task*, in which his antislavery argument, found in book two, concludes with a legal point:

Slaves cannot breathe in England; if their lungs
Receive our air, that moment they are free,
They touch our country and their shackles fall.
That's noble, and bespeaks a nation proud
And jealous of the blessing. Spread it then,
And let it circulate through every vein
Of all your empire. That where Britain's power
Is felt, mankind may feel her mercy too.¹⁰

Cowper's assertion that enslaved people become free the moment they arrive in England was widely believed but not quite accurate. Lord Mansfield had ruled only that English law did not give slaveholders the right to compel their slaves to leave the country against their will.¹¹ Nevertheless, this did effectively free slaves in England since slaveholders had no legal powers to recover slaves if they walked away from their servitude.

Yearsley's point echoes Cowper's but does not replicate it entirely, and it is not clear if Yearsley has the Mansfield ruling specifically in mind or is making a more generalized comparison between English and colonial law. The latter approach is taken by the lawyer Roscoe in his poem *The Wrongs of Africa*, the other important blank verse poem that Yearsley may have read. Roscoe addresses England and says:

Blush ye not
To boast your equal laws, your just restraints,
Your rights defin'd, your liberties secur'd,
Whilst with an iron hand ye crush to earth
The helpless African.¹²

This blunt comparison between metropolitan and colonial practice is more in tune with Yearsley's assessment of the legal situation, both in tone and in form. Like Yearsley, Roscoe draws attention to the inconsistency and places blame squarely on the shoulders of British legislators. This is rather different from the corresponding passage in More's *Slavery* where she apostrophizes Freedom and asks:

Was it decreed, fair Freedom! at thy birth,
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?¹³

This passage offers a somewhat more rarefied discussion of the issue, which seems to place the blame for lack of freedom in Africa at Africa's own door. In More's poem there, is no accompanying call for the British legislature to "Boast your laws," in Yearsley's words, or in Roscoe's words, "Blush ye not / To boast your equal laws." The similarity in language suggests that Roscoe has inspired Yearsley at this point, although Yearsley appears to be using the word "boast" to mean "extend" in this instance since otherwise her meaning would directly contradict Roscoe's (and sense). Finally, Yearsley seems to be explicitly engaging with Roscoe at the outset of her poem. In *The Wrongs of Africa*, Roscoe had called on others to show their support for the abolitionist cause:

Come then, ye generous few, whose hearts can feel
For stranger sorrows; who can hear the voice
Of misery breathe across th' Atlantic main,
Diminish'd not by distance! (p. 23)

Yearsley seems to be responding to this directly in *A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade* when, as we have seen, she asks Bristol neither to ignore her "nor deem Lactilla's soul / Lessen'd by distance." The coincidence of the repeated phrase can hardly be accidental. Yearsley must surely be signalling her poetic affiliation to the broader abolitionist movement by asserting a poetic association with Roscoe rather than More. Perhaps this was a pointed alignment. Perhaps Yearsley was self-consciously advertising her independence from More by allying herself with other abolitionist poets. We can never know, but, either way, this comparative close

reading clearly reveals that Cowper and Roscoe are important poetic influences on Yearsley's *Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade*.

Yearsley, Chatterton, and Radical Abolitionism

The central section of Yearsley's *Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade* is a narrative of the enslavement of "Indian Luco," his act of resistance in attempting to murder an overseer, his attempted suicide by drowning, and finally, his capture and summary execution by burning (p. 5). It is not entirely clear whether Luco is meant to be African or Native American, but in either case, he plainly belongs to a long line of literary captive kings all claiming descent from Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*. Yearsley may have known the *Oroonoko* story from Behn's 1688 novel, through Thomas Southerne's 1698 stage adaptation, or from both. Whether she had seen the play performed is unknown, but it is highly likely that she had read it, possibly in the recent reprint in volume ten of Bell's *British Theatre* (1780).¹⁴ By contrast, we can be quite certain that More was familiar with the play since she includes in her poem a lengthy attack on the uselessness of fictional representations of slavery when what is called for is action to overcome the genuine suffering caused by the slave trade. Addressing the "bard" Southerne directly, More argues:

Tho' not to me, sweet Bard, thy pow'rs belong,
Fair Truth, a hallow'd guide! inspires my song.
Here Art wou'd weave her gayest flow'rs in vain,
For Truth the bright invention wou'd disdain.
For no fictitious ills these numbers flow,
But living anguish, and substantial woe;

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. (p. 4)

Yearsley's decision not only to focus on a "single wrong" (Luco's) but also to base that single example on the figure of Oroonoko could be taken as a direct challenge to More's poetic reasoning. This is only possible, of course, if Yearsley had read More's *Slavery* in advance, which given the publication dates is extremely unlikely. More plausibly, this provides evidence that Yearsley was both working within a longer tradition and familiar with the latest currents in abolitionist verse. Yearsley's prototype is clearly Behn's *Oroonoko*. Although there were other versions of the story available to her, the name of her heroine "Incilanda" certainly resonates with Behn's "Imoinda" while Luco's death by burning closely resembles the dismemberment and burning of Oroonoko in Behn's novel (in Southerne's play, he stabs himself). Nevertheless, although certainly a strong presence, *Oroonoko* may not have been her main direct influence. There is strong textual evidence that Yearsley may have looked closer to home, to the work of another Bristol poet with relatively humble origins: Thomas Chatterton. Alistair Heys has described Chatterton as "Bristol's original angry young man," arguing that "the appalling idea of human bondage" inspired his poem "Heccar and Gaira, an African Eclogue."¹⁵ This 98-line poem was written in 1770, appearing in *The Court and City Magazine* in February of that year, just a few months before the poet's suicide and was republished in 1784 at a time when Chatterton's posthumous fame was reaching new heights.¹⁶ This relatively early date gives Chatterton a good claim to be Bristol's first antislavery poet, while the republication means that it is highly likely that Yearsley would have known the poem.

Close reading reveals strong resonances between the character of Gaira in Chatterton's poem and the character of Luco in Yearsley's poem. In Chatterton's poem, Gaira, an African warrior, is lying exhausted on the beach with his friend Heccar after a day spent fighting European slave traders. They discuss their motives for fighting, and Gaira tells a story about hunting a tiger with a bow and arrow and stripping it of its fur to make a blanket for his wife Cawna:

Swift from the wood a prowling Tiger came;
Dreadful his voice, his eyes a glowing flame;
I bent the bow, the never-erring dart
Pierc'd his rough armour, but escap'd his heart;
He fled, tho' wounded, to a distant waste,
I urg'd the furious flight with fatal haste;
He fell, he dy'd—spent in the fiery toil,
I strip'd his carcass of the furry spoil
And as the varied spangles met my eye,
On this, I cried, shall my lov'd Cawna lie. (p. 57)

Cawna, however, is missing. She and their children have been abducted by European slave traders. In Yearsley's poem, Luco is likewise shown hunting wild animals for his wife, Incilanda. In Luco's case, he is after feathers for her headdress: "For her he strain'd the bow, for her he stript / The bird of beauteous plumage" (p. 11). The pattern of enslavement in Yearsley's poem is the reverse of Chatterton's. In "Heccar and Gaira," Gaira is left behind while his wife and children are enslaved. In Yearsley's poem, Luco is enslaved while Incilanda is left behind. The

reversal is precise. When Incilanda returns to their cave, she finds Luco gone but his possessions remaining:

here his pipe,
Form'd of the polish'd cane, neglected lies,
No more to vibrate; here the useless dart,
The twanging bow, and the fierce panther's skin. (p. 10)

Luco's objects—the bow, the arrow, and the pelt—are Gaira's. Only the pipe is added, presumably since Yearsley sees this as a Native American object. Otherwise, Yearsley has perfectly reversed the scene in Chatterton's poem where Gaira finds Cawna missing to show nearly the same event but from a woman's rather than a man's perspective. The correspondence of Gaira and Luco's objects is too similar to suppose that this is anything other than deliberate.

Yearsley's tactic highlights the suffering of women who lose their husbands and shows that the poem was almost certainly aimed at a female readership. Indeed, while Cawna simply vanishes from Chatterton's poem, leaving Gaira to swear vengeance, Yearsley considers Incilanda's emotional response to her husband's abduction at considerable length:

Distracted maid! ah, leave the breathless form,
On whose cold cheek thy tears so swiftly fall,
Too unavailing! On this stone, she cries,
My Luco sat, and to the wand'ring stars
Pointed my eye, while from his gentle tongue
Fell old traditions of his country's woe.
Where now shall Incilanda seek him? Hence,
Defenceless mourner, ere the dreary night

Wrap thee in added horror. Oh, Despair,
How eagerly thou rend'st the heart! She pines
In anguish deep, and sullen: Luco's form
Pursues her, lives in restless thought, and chides
Soft consolation. Banish'd from his arms,
She seeks the cold embrace of death; her soul
Escapes in one sad sigh. Too hapless maid! (p. 14)

With its framing phrase of distracted/hapless maid, this passage has an aesthetic unity that marks it off as an important part of the overall project. Yearsley invites women to consider what their own response might be to the abduction of their husband and invokes the nightmarish possibilities of despair and suicide. This is dreadful enough, but unlike Chatterton's Cawna, who simply disappears from the narrative, or Behn's Imoinda, who is murdered, Yearsley's Incilanda is represented to us as a more fully realized character, whose internal processes are part of her tragic demise. The passage is a mixture of direct, indirect, and free indirect speech, which to some extent allows us to see her on her own terms; her suffering is seen through her own eyes rather than represented through the loss or rage of a male partner. The same stylistic technique also confuses the voices of narrator and protagonist, blurring the boundary between Yearsley and Incilada and inviting the reader to sympathetically connect with the horrors of despair. In yet another reversal of Chatterton, the act of violence that despair impels is directed inwards. Grief leads to suicide, not murder, a private killing rather than a public one. Even in her final extremity, Incilanda behaves with feminine propriety, but to Yearsley's readers this would almost certainly have made her a more sympathetic character. Unlike Chatterton, who seems to be imagining a primarily male audience, Yearsley is imagining a female audience who might be

mobilized to speak out against the slave trade and who did indeed play an important role in the abolitionist movement.¹⁷

At last, Yearsley returns to Luco. After some time he is brought to an unknown island, there “to plant / The sweet luxuriant cane” (p. 16). After some time “resignation, or a calm despair” leads him to accept his fate and work without complaint until a particularly vicious overseer, Gorgon, a violent and dishonest fugitive from England, strikes Luco with “a too heavy-whip” and blinds him in one eye (pp. 16, 18). Luco’s response is unusual for abolitionist poetry: he returns the blow. The final scene of Luco’s narrative takes place on the beach where Luco attempts to drown himself, is rescued, and then slowly roasted alive (a scene which occupies over twenty lines of lurid verse).

Luco’s story resembles Gaira’s in two important respects. First, both end on the beach. This makes perfect sense in Chatterton’s poem since Cawna and the children are abducted by European sailors, whom Chatterton calls “The Children of the Wave” (p. 56). In both Chatterton’s poem and in the real world, the shoreline is the point of colonial encounter, a liminal zone between Europe, its trading partners, and its conquests. For that reason, Chatterton’s poem takes place entirely on the beach. In Yearsley’s poem, by contrast, the beach is not necessary to the plot. Yearsley shows Luco attempting the murder in a sugar field, so the shift of scene to the beach must fulfil some other formal or intertextual function. In colonial discourse, the beach is often a metonym for empire in its broadest sense for the reasons just given. It is certainly possible that Yearsley moved the action to the beach to highlight, consciously or otherwise, that Luco’s fate was unavoidably bound up with networks of trade, conquest, and colonial encounter. It seems far more likely, however, that Yearsley wanted Luco’s narrative to

conclude on the shoreline because that is where Chatterton had set his poem. The beach acts as another intertextual link between the two.

The second resemblance, and for Yearsley a far more radical one, comes about because both poems represent actual or attempted acts of violent resistance. Luco strikes Gorgon with his hoe in an attempt to kill him. This violent response echoes Gaira's vow of perpetual vengeance at the end of Chatterton's poem:

In ever-reeking blood this jav'lin dy'd
With vengeance shall be never satisfied:
I'll strew the beaches with the mighty dead
And tinge the lily of their features red. (p. 58)

Wood has argued convincingly that Chatterton's poem is particularly important because he takes this unusual and dangerous step of showing Gaira vowing violent revenge against the European slave traders who abducted his family. As Wood makes clear, this is unusual since "when vengeance is discussed in later abolition poetry, it is seen as God's prerogative" (p. 73). Wood cites More as an example of this tendency in later abolitionist verse, although a better example might have been Bicknell and Day's *The Dying Negro*. This poem ended with the suicide of its unnamed hero who, in his dying breath, asks God to sink the slave ship, drown its crew, and damn them to hell. This "impious expostulation" shocked some reviewers, although others thought it a fair representation of what a dying enslaved African might wish on his captors.¹⁸ The point is that even merely depicting the action of a slave asking God to hand out vengeance outraged some.¹⁹ Showing an enslaved African taking direct violent action against a British planter, even a thoroughly nasty one like Gorgon, and inviting the reader to sympathize with the

African, was a blatant challenge to colonial authority and a dangerous narrative maneuver. Many contemporary readers must have been deeply shocked.

In Chatterton's poem, Heccar and Gaira are presented as heroes fending off a foreign invasion. The battle is indirectly reported rather than directly described, and no identifiable Europeans are killed. This impersonal warfare, as opposed to personal vengeance, may be part of the poem's pathos. Kim Ian Michasiw has suggested that Gaira is akin to an Ossianic warrior whose tragedy is that his revenge cannot be achieved. He argues that "Cawna's kidnapers have no names, no addresses, and their crime is an industry. Gaira knows not where to seek; he can only remain, haunting the shore, exacting inadequate revenge on each new party of slavers."²⁰ Luco, by contrast, earnestly attempts Gorgon's murder in person, which we learn about in a detailed and forensic way. The murder weapon was "his hoe," Yearsley tells us, with which he "struck the rude Christian on the forehead" (p. 18). The detail, the forcefulness, and the personal nature of the assault, indeed make the poem highly unusual for the period and, unlike More's, establish it as a radical intervention in the abolitionist debate of the 1780s. Nevertheless, Luco's attempt to murder Gorgon fails, and it seems that ultimate vengeance remains God's prerogative after all. Perhaps invoking the ending to Day and Bicknell's *Dying Negro*, Yearsley calls on God to punish profane slave traders:

Gracious God!

Why thus in mercy let thy whirlwinds sleep

O'er a vile race of Christians, who profane

Thy glorious attributes? Sweep them from earth,

Or check their cruel pow'r: the savage tribes

Are angels when compared to brutes like these. (p. 25)

The demand that God sweep slave traders from earth is indeed radical, although Yearsley immediately rows back from it with the more measured demand that their power be simply limited. Nevertheless, when seen in the context of Luco's assault on Gorgon, one infers that Yearsley prefers sweeping to checking. The poem implies direct action at least, and violent social change is not far beneath the surface.

It is difficult to say whether or not Yearsley's radical abolitionism is merely an attempt to establish poetic difference between her and More. Bearing in mind the development of Yearsley's interests in the years to follow, however, particularly in *Earl Godwin* (1791) and *The Royal Captives* (1795), it seems more likely that she is developing a genuinely radical antislavery sensibility at this point. This of course could not be sustained for long. The following year's revolution in France and the 1791 revolution in Saint-Domingue that it engendered made radical abolitionism impossible and almost killed off the antislavery movement entirely. That was for the future. In 1788, given that her slavery poem neither resembles More's nor engages with More's in any sustained way, given that it shows clear affinities with the work of Cowper, Roscoe, and Chatterton, and given that every poet in the country was at that point composing verses about the slave trade, personal rivalries notwithstanding, I conclude that the Yearsley's poem can and should be read as an independent contribution to the important political campaign of slave-trade abolition and not merely as evidence of a sustained squabble with Hannah More. This conclusion should lead us to new readings of the poem and may compel us to change the question: to ask not who influenced Yearsley, but whom Yearsley herself influenced. *A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade* appeared relatively early in the poetic campaign against the slave trade, and Yearsley was reasonably well known and widely read. Although it is readily apparent that the majority of British antislavery poets did not follow her radical lead, at least

insofar as her depiction of violent resistance to slavery was concerned, it seems probable that close reading of the many hundreds of antislavery poems that followed hers will reveal that she did inspire others. Further intertextual study of this important poem might do well to look towards Yearsley's future influence as well as to her past influences.

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NOTES

¹ See Mary Waldron, *Lactilla, Milkwoman of Clifton: The Life and Writings of Ann Yearsley, 1753-1806* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 168; Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 92; Kerri Andrews, *Ann Yearsley and Hannah More, Patronage and Poetry: The Story of a Literary Relationship* (London: Pickering and Chatto 2013), 85-87. Subsequent references to Waldron and Andrews will be cited parenthetically in the text.

² J. M. S. Tompkins, "The Bristol Milkwoman," in *The Polite Marriage: Eighteenth-Century Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 74. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

³ Wylie Sypher, *Guinea's Captive Kings: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the XVIIIth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 198-99. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴ Donna Landry, *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739-1796* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); see in particular p. 238.

⁵ Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 170, 171.

⁶ James G. Basker, *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems about Slavery, 1660-1810* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xliii; see also pp. 373-77.

⁷ Marcus Wood, *The Poetry of Slavery: An Anglo-American Anthology, 1764-1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 120. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁸ For discussion of *The Dying Negro* in the context of antislavery verse more generally, see Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 73-106. Basker's *Amazing Grace* and Wood's *The Poetry of Slavery* are two major anthologies that demonstrate and discuss the enormous output of antislavery verse. There is as yet no standard cultural history of British abolitionism, but for histories that pay attention to the cultural aspect, see Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988); J. R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion Against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807* (London: Routledge, 1998); and Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The First International Human Rights Movement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2005).

⁹ Ann Yearsley, *A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave Trade* (London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1788), 3. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁰ William Cowper, *The Task*, in *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, vol. 2, 1782-1785 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 140, lines 40-47.

¹¹ The story of the James Somerset case and the Mansfield decision is told at length in Steven M. Wise, *Though the Heavens May Fall: The Landmark Trial That Led to the End of Human Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2005).

¹² William Roscoe, *The Wrongs of Africa, a Poem. Part the First* (London: R. Faulder, 1787), 32. The poem is available online at <http://www.brycchancarey.com/slavery/roscoe1.htm>. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹³ Hannah More, *Slavery, a Poem* (London: T. Cadell, 1788), 2. The poem is available online at <http://www.brycchancarey.com/slavery/morepoems.htm>. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁴ *Bell's British theatre, consisting of the most esteemed English plays. Volume the tenth. Being the fifth volume of tragedies. Containing Merope, by Aaron Hill. Barbarossa, by . . . Dr. Brown. Alzira, by Aaron Hill. Phædra and Hippolitus, by Mr. Smith. Oroonoko, by Thomas Southern* (London: John Bell, 1780).

¹⁵ Alistair Heys, introduction to *From Gothic to Romantic: Thomas Chatterton's Bristol* (Bristol: Redcliffe Press, 2005), 15, 14.

¹⁶ Thomas Chatterton, "Heccar and Gaira. An African Eclogue," *The Court and City Magazine*, February 1770, 53. The text used here is the reprint in *A Supplement to the Miscellanies of Thos Chatterton* (London: T. Becket, 1784), 45-59. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁷ The standard history of women's involvement in the British antislavery campaign is Clare Midgley, *Women against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992). The role of female poets in the campaign has in particular been studied in Landry's *Muses of Resistance* and Ferguson's *Subject to Others*.

¹⁸ Review of "The Dying Negro: A Poetical Epistle from a Black to his Intended Wife," *The Gentleman's Magazine*, October 1773, 504.

¹⁹ For extended discussion of the poem and its reviews, see Carey, *British Abolitionism*, 75-84.

²⁰ Kim Ian Michasiw, "Chatterton, Ossian, Africa," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 48 (2008), 645.