TRANSATLANTIC POETRY IN THE LONG EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: MILTON, EMPIRE, AND THE POETICS OF LIBERTY

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by

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

As Atlantic studies has opened the archive of the eighteenth century in pursuit of the political and social dynamics of imperial subjectivity that lead to the rise of the nation, much emphasis has been placed on the periodical and narrative prose works through which writers expressed their views and shared their experience. However, the genres of poetry, including the epic, pastoral, georgic, ballad, and lyric have been largely left out of such examination due to the heritage of modernist attitudes on the nature of poetry. By reading archival poetry alongside canonical works of the period, this project explicates a tradition of poetic expression that utilizes a range of tropes in order to affect public discourse throughout England, North America, and the Caribbean. These tropes, which I have called the poetics of liberty, demonstrate, when viewed across the century, changing dynamics of imperial subjectivity and how the social, cultural, and political relationships of the people within the Atlantic world change. Poetry, as a significant venue of political discussion, provides insights into the incremental shifts that accumulate, by the end of the eighteenth century, into the political revolutions throughout the Atlantic world.

By tracing the poetics of liberty from John Milton through to Phillis Wheatley, this dissertation argues for the contributions poetry can make into ongoing discussions throughout Atlantic studies. Each chapter examines archival and canonical texts to understand a different area of debate, including mercantilism, relations with native populations, and slavery. This allows me to argue for the role of poetry in political debate throughout the period. Finally, I conclude with some thoughts on the legacy of the poetics of liberty in the emerging American republic of the nineteenth century.
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Introduction

In 1730, a Virginia poet, J. Markland, marked the occasion of the first printing press in Williamsburg by composing an ode to printing entitled “Typographia.” The poem, having been immediately occasioned by the procurement of the (apparently) long sought-after machine by the Lieutenant-Governor of the colony (identified in the poem as Gooch), uses the occasion to reflect more broadly on the entirety of the British imperial project, and particularly on the role of print within the processes of empire, as arbiter between colony and metropole. In his description of Gooch’s triumph in gifting the colony with the press, Markland forwards a vision of empire that yokes politics, law, and art in creating, maintaining, and producing a fruitful and mutually beneficial relationship for all members of the imperial project:

By whom all *Arts* recov’ring live,

That erst like drooping Plants had dropt their Head.

And once again, with native Vigour thrive:

From whom VIRGINIA’S Laws, that lay

In blotted *Manuscripts* obscur’d

By vulgar Eyes unread,

Which whilome scarce the Light endur’d,

Begin to view again the Day,

As rising from the Dead.

For this the careful *Artist* wakes,

And o’er the countless Brood he stands,

His numerous hoards,

Of speechless Letters, *uniform’d* Words,
Unjointed questions, and unmeaning Breaks,
Which into Order rise, and form, at his Commands. (10-11)

In the intermingling of art and law, the poet is forwarding an argument for his own place (as artist) within the imperial project, demonstrating the centrality that poetry and other arts have in the cultivation of civility and the formulation of coherent discourse about political matters. Whereas the laws help to correct the “vulgar eyes,” the artist gives form and rule to similarly listless entities, the “Speechless Letters, unform’d Words, / unjointed questions, and unmeaning Breaks.” The poet extends this thought later, arguing in the next segment (VIII) that “Eloquence employs the mind, / the Artist lags behind. His lab’ring Thoughts and Wisdom teem, / And struggle with the mighty Birth; / Thy Art does like Lucina seem, / And only helps to send the perfect Embrio forth.” The suggestion here is that where eloquence and law create a fertile ground for thought, art will soon follow, and though it may take longer (and be of more difficult birth) art’s boons to society will be equal to the others. It is through artistic expression, and particularly poetry, that the “countless brood” and “numerous hoards” will gain the order, purpose, and function that will allow them to participate in modern politics. Thus, the power of the press, to Markland and many of his contemporaries, is in public discourse and art, and in this period, both flourish in poetry (Markland’s chosen form).

The views expressed in “Typographia” are emblematic of the role played by poetry in the Atlantic world throughout the long eighteenth century. As post-revolutionary England turned considerably more attention and resources to expanding its influence across the seas and throughout the New World, poetry became an increasingly important venue in which poets, both amateur and established, could debate the functions of empire from minute localized laws and policies to overarching attempts to conceptualize, authorize, and/or structure the entirety of
British colonization. Poets, working alongside politicians, magistrates, and scholars, used periodicals, broadsides, and books to establish a broad public discourse that was an offshoot of public political discourse and often continued arguments beyond the specific occasion in which they first arose. Poetry, as a highly constructed form of expression, and one imbued with aesthetic form, was often a privileged means of entering public debate. Though often exclusive in nature, the form of poetic expression granted arguments an air of civility and, as the century continued, became an avenue for excluded voices to participate in public discourse. Poets, as in the case of Markland, could wrap a specific and clear political argument in the artistry of meter and the garb of neoclassicism to give the argument gravitas and wider appeal. The poetic form granted the thought an eloquence that other arguments lacked. Therefore, the work of Markland (and many of his contemporaries) suggests that, if we are to seek answers to broad questions about empire and subjectivity in the eighteenth century, we have to abandon critical categorizations that marginalize poetic expression into a separate artistic domain and instead reassert poetry’s position at the heart of public discourse on a variety of political, social, and economic issues that dominated the Atlantic world throughout the eighteenth century.

This dissertation examines poetry produced in England, the Caribbean, and North America in order to understand the role of poetry in the political discourse that surrounds the British imperial project across the long eighteenth century. In doing so, it, like the work of others, casts aside anachronistic modernist conceptions of poetry as rarified aesthetic object and acknowledges its central position in the political discourse of the eighteenth century. This recovery of the important interventions of poetry in political, social, and economic discourse contributes significantly to a wide array of scholarly conversations and narratives that have dominated Atlantic studies since its inception, including the rise of the nation, the significance of
the print-public sphere, conceptualizations of gender and race, and the nature of imperial subjectivity. At the heart of this work is the rejection of long held biases that have caused a tendency to neglect poetry in favor of pursuing narrative and historical sources when tracking questions of political subjectivity in the Atlantic world. In these ahistorical perspectives, poetry is often thought of as a separate discourse, based in aesthetics and form, and lacking in political engagement. As this dissertation suggests, the archive of Atlantic poetry has much to offer these areas of inquiry, and can improve and correct dominant narratives of political discourse which trace activities solely in the works of narrative and prose. That is, the exclusion of poetry has fundamentally limited a number of heuristics into the politics of empire throughout the eighteenth-century Atlantic, and only through a reconfiguring of generic considerations can we understand the realities of public discourse in this period.

My examination of the ways in which poetry played a significant role in political discourse from post-revolutionary England through to the nascent steps of American poets at the dawn of the nineteenth century demonstrates a broad awareness of and interest in politics in venues both elite and common, in both exclusive clubs, and the pages of widely circulated newspapers. Yet, to be clear, this is not a project that opens the archive in order to achieve recovery for the sake of recovery. The poetry examined and analyzed throughout this dissertation represents a significant body of work that forms the basis of a new understanding of how political discourse was fashioned, how it functioned, and how it was received by the poets, peoples, and polities functioning within and around the Atlantic world. This new understanding focuses on how form and perspective were balanced within poetry in order that its function within political discourse would give it greater purchase than any reckoning of its aesthetic merits. This rich archive of poetry informs a range of significant scholarly conversations.
including not just the nature of political discourse, but also imperial subjectivity, the rise of the nation, and contemporary perspectives on the institution of slavery throughout the entire British imperial project.

Understanding political discourse in the eighteenth century requires careful consideration of the unprecedented global contexts in which said discourse occurred. In the wake of the English Civil War, the citizens of Britain found themselves on the precipice of a great expansion of their political, social, and economic power throughout the globe, and particularly in the New World. At the dawn of the eighteenth century, there existed no direct historical precedents on which to model the exercise of power or the scale of political and social dominion upon which England was embarking. Coupled with this, the continued waning power of the sacred institutions that had long dominated European social and political life left many, both those in power and those not, seeking new forms of affiliation and authority to fill the void left by the shrinking influences of monarch and church.¹ In this context, the broad expansion of capitalist institutions and policies further increased public anxiety about the nature of power and the political dynamics of mercantilism. Unnerved by the greed underpinning such policies, many feared that the unbridled economic and geographic expansion of the empire represented a corruption of the values at the heart of the British people. Within each of these tensions lies the evolving concept of liberty and the ways in which the institutions and systems of empire, commerce, and regulation impeded or aided in its proper functioning. The transformations of political power across the eighteenth century are all functions of this same dialectic over liberty, and the great moments of upheaval that mark the end of the century are fostered in specific

¹ As Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities*, exploration outside of Europe and the pluralization of language that followed it led to the questioning of both sacred and monarchical communities, leading subjects away from conceptualizations wherein “states were defined by centres, borders were porous and indistinct, and sovereignties faded imperceptibly into one another” (19).
disagreements about what does or does not equal the proper protections of personal liberty within the systems of empire. While scholars agree that liberty is the defining theme of the eighteenth century, few have traced this specific debate as a marker of continuity from Milton through to the emerging American republic. Based on the archive of poetry I have studied, and its presence throughout pamphlets, periodicals, and books, I argue that this continuity is the most accurate understanding of the evolution of political ideals across the Atlantic world.

The latter half of the eighteenth century is defined by the revolutions that symbolize the expansion of democracy and the entry of the middle class into public discourse. However, by the dawn of the eighteenth century, this expansion had already begun. In the metropole, an increasingly large population found themselves participating in political discourse via intellectual clubs, argument societies, and coffeehouses. In the colonies, newspaper publishing was increasing access to text and information while also giving new voices (though definitely not all) an opportunity to participate in public debate. While much of this discourse is lost to time, the archive of newspapers, club minutes, and ephemera demonstrates the pervasiveness that political and economic discourses of empire enjoyed throughout the period. In these contexts, poetry operated not as a separate artistic or creative expression, but as a well-defined rhetorical tool which could be and was employed to add merit or authority to an argument, to marinate a position or statement in wit, or even to express complicated or controversial positions in a more palatable fashion. For these reasons, returning poetry to its position within examinations of eighteenth century political discourse greatly enriches our understanding of the period.

Following the rise of cultural studies, academics have often employed a two-sphere model to understand political and aesthetic discourse, and while the relationships and overlaps between

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2 While poetry represents an avenue to political participation for several women and persons of color by the end of the century (particularly Phillis Wheatley, whose work I will examine in Chapter Four), public discourse through poetry begins the century as a particularly exclusive discourse of white, educated men.
the two have been explored sporadically, this project seeks to return to a historical context in which the two spheres function as one.

While poetry has not been ignored entirely in scholarship’s turn toward the Atlantic, any prolonged examination of the retinue of Atlantic studies shows how overlooked the range of poetic genres (epic, pastoral, georgic, lyric, and ballad) and their functions have been. While this is easily observed, the reasons behind the lack of critical engagement are a bit harder to trace. I argue here that the root of this neglect lies in a double bind in which poetry of the Atlantic world has found itself; it is at once too occasional and not occasional enough. Broadly speaking, poetry is perceived as being both too mundane and lacking in aesthetic merit or transcendent themes (that is, too rooted in its specific occasion) and yet it is also thought to be wholly separate from its historical and political contexts. This places the archive of Atlantic poetry uncomfortably between the needs and interests of poetry scholars and the primary areas of inquiry for Atlantic scholars.3 The poems from the period that are studied generally participate in a specific trend or theme studied by poetry scholars, or else offer insight into a specific historical event of global or local history. Beyond this, the poetry of the eighteenth century is also done a disservice by traditional conceptualizations of the canon as it exists at the junction of national (English and American), generic, and temporal categorizations. While many of these boundaries and demarcations are being interrogated and redefined across the field, traditional classifications cast long shadows that affect many areas of inquiry to this day. By choosing to read the period

3 This argument is much indebted to Mary Loeffelholz’s argument about recovery in nineteenth-century poetry from the introduction to From School to Salon. Loeffelholz writes “Recovery efforts in nineteenth-century American writing have tended to privilege social themes as a principle of selection and as their central critical means of understanding literature’s indebtedness to history... the new American Studies, like the old, tacitly preserves poetry in its unexamined New Critical role as apolitical and asocial aesthetic object” (2). I agree fully with this articulation of what I have called a “double bind,” but suggest that these same critical trends do greater insult to the eighteenth-century Atlantic poets who also lack relevance to a specific national framework or to canonical authors of great popularity.
through its continuities (that is, the evolution of social and political trends) as opposed to its ruptures, this dissertation begins the work of tracing how new perspectives developed slowly, smoothed and weathered by the ebb and flow of continuous political debates.

Generally speaking, the poetry produced and circulated in the periodicals and books of the eighteenth-century Atlantic is set between Milton and the Romantics and suffers from comparison to both. Modernist attitudes from the twentieth century that guided canon transformation of the earlier periods emphasize the importance of Milton in the creation of a rich epic that at once represented his political and cultural moment while also demonstrating a peak of neoclassical tropes that wove together the greatest works of Western culture with the Christian worldview of Milton’s own beliefs. For a time in the twentieth century, it became fashionable to say that Milton’s poem effectively completed (or if nothing else, ended) the genre of epic and the early modern period. These reductive narratives then skip to the Romantics and find in their reverence for the natural world and aesthetic beauty the reemergence of the English poetic tradition. This critical trajectory also reinforces the relegation of poetry to an apolitical sphere. In this light, the poetry of the eighteenth-century Atlantic is dismissed frequently as being too imitative of Milton (even the canonical Alexander Pope rarely evades this condemnation) or simply lacking in quality. Such distinctions value a particular aesthetic and have actually hurt our understanding of the period by marginalizing important voices and fora which negotiated the most significant debates of the period surrounding slavery, economics, and personal liberty. While more recent anthologies have attempted to correct this void, poetic genres are still largely ignored. In the eighth edition of Norton’s Anthology of English Literature (2006), an entire volume (C) is devoted to “The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century.” Yet still, the volume, which showcases the political and economic writings of Enlightenment figures (including Locke,
Swift, and Addison), contains few poems not written by John Milton, with an extended sampling of Alexander Pope and a few other poets, most under the somewhat belittling heading of “Popular Ballads.” Further, within a subsection of texts devoted to writings on liberty, which, as they rightly assert, resonated in the minds of British writers more than any other concept (2828), the anthology only includes a single poetic work, James Thomson’s “Rule, Britannia.” The effect such anthologies have had over conceptualizations of the period is clear, and while much more interesting work is being done elsewhere, the lack of attention given to poetry in the period remains the legacy of such editorial decisions made throughout the field from the 1940s onward.

On the opposite side of the critical spectrum, the rise of Atlantic studies has sought to open the archive of the eighteenth century Atlantic world in order to better understand the period and its peoples. As the turn toward the Atlantic was itself an outgrowth of new historicism, the primary goals of the field have been oriented towards questions of historical context and the breaking down of national frameworks that have undermined a complete understanding of the period’s sociopolitical landscape (like my methodology, an attempt to find continuity instead of rupture). Coupled with this, much of the foundational work of the field pursued the roots of the rise of the nation and its dominant genre, the novel. As the field has continued to grow and incorporate a wider array of texts and voices, the emphasis on narrative and historical documents has remained. Scholarship favors narrative as well as periodical, diary, and correspondence sources in uncovering and understanding the people and peoples in the Atlantic world. To these scholars, the genres they focus on represent an authentic account of the experiences and perspectives of the Atlantic world that is clouded by performative efforts to a lesser degree. Although the works examined undoubtedly include a certain amount of constructed-ness and artistry, the ostensible goal of most is an accurate or realistic account, and deviations from this
(and the biases they expose) are generally obvious and often as fruitful to scholarship as the factual account. For scholars pursuing these goals, the poetry produced and circulated alongside these other texts of the Atlantic world exists in a separate domain, one that, in its artistry and form, clouds possible insights into political subjectivity. That is, poets, by aiming towards aesthetic form or transcendent themes, have little to offer conversations about the peoples and spaces of the period. Poetry in this view contains an obvious remove from context that these other genres do not. To these scholars, although poetry may reflect dominant views and values of the age, it doesn’t represent the lived experience of individuals in the Atlantic world. This view is both confirmed and complicated by the fact that poetry, even in its simplest, most localized forms, has a high cost of entry. That is, for a poet to produce work of merit (even by contemporary standards) there is a clear amount of educational and cultural capital that must be displayed, or else the poem is unlikely to have gained a readership. This builds in a bias towards white upper-class males that, while lessened throughout the period, limits the utility of these texts in a variety of critical discussions (most clearly those surrounding race and gender). However, by unpacking these built-in biases through a specifically literary perspective, the poems produced in the Atlantic can provide enormous insight into these critical discussions.

To be clear, I recognize that in painting in these broad strokes I am favoring general approaches and doing a disservice to the work of many individual scholars. While much of what I have here outlined has long been recognized and is the target of work attempting to correct the course of scholarship, these trends are the critical heritage that has long marginalized the poetry of the Atlantic world. However, the attitudes I have described are at best anachronistic, tainted by the academic agents of intervening centuries, and not reflective of the contemporary role

4 Chief amongst these are perhaps David Shields and Suvir Kaul, to whom I owe much for their engagement with poetry.
poetry played in political discourse. Both of the perspectives I have recounted here tend to present characterizations of poetry of the period as either guttural and inelegant or as elitist and aloof (hence the double bind of which I spoke). In other words, while both perspectives recognize the high volume of poetry being produced throughout the Atlantic world over the course of the eighteenth century, they lack a clear critical methodology through which to situate the material within the critical conversations. This dissertation provides just such a methodology in order to forward an argument about the intersection of poetry and politics.

While I recognize the critical apparatuses that have led us, perhaps inadvertently, to the neglect of poetry in Atlantic studies, I forcefully reject the basic premise from which both are built: treating politics and aesthetics as distinct and separate fields of discourse is, in its very nature, the imposition of a high modernist perspective onto peoples and texts that exist within very different structures of social, political, and cultural identification. That is, to realize the nature of public discourse in the eighteenth century, we must recognize not just the overlap, but the inseparability of the economic, the aesthetic, and the political. Shared aesthetic values of form and order have roots in the political and social systems of empire. Not only did poets not view themselves as being of a separate order from those articulating political views, but they were themselves expressing the very same values of identification through a set of poetic signifiers themselves authorized by political subjectivity. The symbiotic processes through which these perspectives are written and rewritten demonstrate the inextricability of a single strand and how, only in full appreciation of the interwoven nature of public discourse in the age of empire, we can understand the function of poetry in the most important debates of the period. What I am arguing for, and what I shall adhere to throughout this dissertation, is an eighteenth-century Atlantic aesthetic which gives equal consideration to political, economic, and artistic expression
in the way it informs and is informed by the form, content, and context with which and into which this poetry is presented.

This refiguring of an Atlantic aesthetic allows for a more nuanced understanding of the poetry produced in the period contains a panoply of voices, forms, purposes, and contexts. Each text in this corpus thereby represents a refigured definition both of artistic expression and of public discourse, the two being fused. As Jacques Rancière argues, “Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. It is on this primary aesthetics that it is possible to raise the question of ‘aesthetic practices’ as I understand them, that is, forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they ‘do’ or ‘make’ from the standpoint of what is common to the community” (13). In just this way, the forms and content chosen by the poets of the Atlantic work dialectically to reform shared understandings of artistic expression and of public discourse. To discuss what was valued or what held potency in one domain was also to influence the other. While the development of these processes had been underway since the English Civil War, it is in the eighteenth century, as the body politic, no longer bound by a singular geographic identity, that the citizenry relied increasingly on a shared cultural aesthetic to signify community, continuity, rupture, and difference. To understand the period through this lens is to recognize how deeply the language of commerce and politics permeated the aesthetic taste of the period through shared values of organization and form. As Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker argue in the introduction to their collection *Refiguring Revolutions*, this new understanding breathes fresh life into the dialectics at work in public discourse, but returns us to the familiar confines that have long defined the period: “Moreover, not only an exchange for commerce, scandal, and political news, the
coffeehouse became the locus of aesthetic and critical judgment: commercial society with its self-validating language of politeness and claims to arbitrate taste looked to be establishing cultural and political hegemony” (8). In the coffeehouse these trends write and rewrite themselves visibly, flowing together and redirecting the energies of the age both with purpose and as unintended consequence. But, as I shall demonstrate, as the lawyers, businessmen, artists, and merchants spread throughout the British diaspora and around the Atlantic, the same processes continue to churn in tandem, if not in parallel, and the poetry of the Atlantic presents the record of the evolution the discourse they take up undergoes.

With a full understanding of Atlantic aesthetics, it becomes increasingly clear that to classify the period’s texts as being of a single cultural position or of a single purpose is pure folly. The archive of poetry represents a highly diverse range of voices that supersedes class, race, gender, geography, and political distinctions. While disparities of beauty, utility, and purpose remain, understanding the manner in which these texts, regardless of occasion and efficacy, demonstrate the politics of imperial subjectivity provides an invaluable record of the age. To be sure, eighteenth-century poetry was a wholly different species than that of the periods that preceded it. To the reading public of the eighteenth century, poetry was not a rarified experience or solely a path towards sublimity. While it was held sacred in inherited volumes, it was also consumed casually over meals alongside the events and advertisements that filled the rest of the newspapers. Broadsides and pamphlets would use a simple couplet or witty stanza to hook attention, forward a view, or complete a long argument with a memorable coda. While some educated poets would imitate Milton’s form and style, others would use rigid structures of rhyme and meter without a care given to classical antecedents. Constructing an Atlantic aesthetic that balances form and function (aesthetics and politics) allows for a new interpretation of these
texts and the rightful repositioning of them alongside works of prose that have been used to define subjectivity across the era.

The positions and roles of poetry in the eighteenth-century Atlantic are epitomized by the newspapers that play a critical role in public discourse across the century and through a wide range of political, social, and economic developments and debates. Locating the impact of poetry in these periodicals makes two sides of its nature quite clear and demonstrates how poetry of the period merged aesthetic and factual concerns. Throughout the period, North American publications like the *Boston News-Letter*, the *New England Weekly Journal*, and Philadelphia’s *American Mercury*, all frequently give page-one, column-one space over to the publication of poetry and its criticism. The August 21, 1727 issue of *The New-England Weekly Journal* devotes two of its four pages to printing an encomium to Milton’s genius inspired by the reading of *Paradise Lost*, while the November 5, 1722 edition of the *New-England Courant* gives three columns over to an evaluation of the genre of funeral elegy (it being the “most universally admir’d and and used” specie of poem in New England). However, beyond this favored place for the arts (which is quite like that which Markland envisioned), there is another dimension to poetry’s role in the colonies found in the back columns of advertisements. In the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of August 31, 1741, a new volume of “Poems on Several Occasions, by Aquila Rose,” is advertised for a shilling immediately above an ad promising thirty shillings for information leading to the capture of “A servant man, named Robert Anderson, about 30 years of age, of middle stature, well set, black complexion,” and another ad offering freight or passage to London aboard the ship *Snow Penguin*, which boasts 12 guns. The May 21, 1716 edition of *The Boston News-Letter* advertises an auction of “a valuable collection of books and pamphlets, consisting of

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5 “O Milton! I’m transported at thy name! / My soul takes wing at once, and shoots away, / Born eager by a tyde of thought along.”
divinity, history, classics, physic, poetry, mathematics, &c. in several languages” to be held “at
the sign of the Royal Exchange in King Street.” This advertisement is itself placed below an ad
offering “Cheshire Cheese & Spanish Iron…lately arriv’d from England,” and above an ad for
“A very likely negro boy to be sold, about 14 years of age.” As these publications demonstrate,
poetry operates on two wavelengths in eighteenth-century public discourse: as a tool through
which to conceptualize and debate experience and culture, and as a commodity. In this way,
many poems in the period become a means of commodifying discourse, moving ideas and values
from intangible to tangible form, from attainable to obtainable. That is, the voices supporting or
criticizing the imperial system were themselves creating and propagating a system that circulated
ideas, goods, and people throughout vast expanses of space and across cultural boundaries.
While this was true in the seventeenth century, the explosive expansion of the print-public sphere
across the eighteenth century meant that writers, poets, and citizens had a vastly different array
of avenues through which to produce and consume poetry and other texts.

While it is the goal of this project to explore the ways in which poetry was used to
authorize and debate the policies of empire in the Atlantic world, it is my intention never to lose
sight of its placement amongst the many goods and people being circulated and directed by the
policies of mercantilism. Poetry in the eighteenth-century Atlantic is not a removed art that
remains outside of common discourse, nor is it a language used exclusively by cultural elites and
academics. Poetry in the Atlantic world exists on these pages, written by amateurs and experts,
as a means of marking specific occasions, instructing others on matters of spirituality and
morality, and debating public policy. Beyond this, there are many clubs, coffeehouses, and
informal organizations that circulated their views via poetic expression in order to give their
arguments weight and attract attention. While the exact readership and impact of any given poem
is impossible to trace, remembering that the print public sphere guaranteed access and circulation of these ideas demonstrates a form of consumption that directly differs from what the critical tradition suggests. Yet despite the wide range of purposes, uses, and forms, these poems of every type, occasion, and quality share a broad set of tropes that demonstrate the role that poets played, whether intentionally or by chance, in the shaping of public opinion about the imperial project as it continued to evolve over the eighteenth century.

As I argue throughout this dissertation, the dominant mode of poetry in the eighteenth-century Atlantic is best understood as a pervasive and multifaceted dialectic on empire and the nature of subjectivity within its political, economic, and social systems. This dialectic, which I refer to as the poetics of liberty, manifests itself in almost every topic of public discourse and gives rise to a vocabulary of metaphors, symbols, and tropes that appear in poetry written in all parts of the British empire. A careful analysis of these tropes and their deployment in a wide range of texts allows for a clearer understanding of how discourse, debate, and disagreement functioned throughout the empire within the rise of the print-public sphere. While traditional models for this process have necessarily been questioned because of their initial idealized representations, all agree that there did exist a public forum in the period in which a range of stakeholders attempted to reconcile their personal experiences with the larger policies of empire. As the policies of empire churned throughout the region, an eddy of public debate and dissonance spun continually in their wake. In poetry, this most often took the form of debating how the imperial system did or did not respect the rights of individuals (both subjects and the indigenous and enslaved persons who fell under imperial power), questions that were continually renewed and reshaped by continued exploration, settlement, and conflict throughout the Atlantic. While no single topic or even broad categorization can fully encapsulate the vast array
of trajectories the poetry throughout the Atlantic world represents, poetry’s greatest contributions to political thought throughout the eighteenth century are best understood as a continual progressive and recursive dialectic that unfolds, through a variety of contexts, perspectives, and political affiliations, around the central concept of liberty. Liberty, a concept which gains in significance, complexity, and notoriety throughout the period, represents the single most important topic in political discourse from which a variety of disparate voices draw authority to speak toward imperial policies, achievements, and deficiencies.

While each individual poet represents only a limited perspective and approach to political discourse in the period, by turning to the archive, I have compiled a range of specific tropes and conventions that operate, in tandem and/or in conflict, across the range of arguments and debates found in political discourse throughout the long eighteenth century. This poetics of liberty represents a shared language through which policies and practices can be debated, and that, when viewed across time, demonstrates significant changes in imperial subjectivity. At the core of this group of tropes is a specific rhetorical strategy that I call a “dual vision” through which poets are continuously triangulating the contemporary moment between historical precedents and the potentialities a future guided by empire can bring to pass. This dual vision, which many poets take as the basis for Miltonic neoclassicism, rests on allusions to classical mythology and culture, and uses such comparisons to the empires of antiquity as a means of differentiating the British imperial system from its contemporaries, and authorizing it. Most often, this manifests itself as an argument for the system (and even its most exploitative practices) as just due to the presence and exercise of individual liberty that is maintained within its policies. That is, the British Empire, by maintaining individual liberty, will neither denigrate itself with the barbarism of antiquity, nor suffer similarly ignoble fates. This is the primary rhetorical position of Milton’s
Areopagitica, which, to argue for the “Liberty of Unlicenc’d Printing,” within the complicated systems of contemporary Britain, takes its title, form, and rhetorical tone from an undelivered oration of Isocrates, a complicated allusion that others will mimic throughout the period.⁶ Liberty, in this dual vision, becomes the key difference between the barbaric empires of old and the modern empire, the authorization of British practices, and often the single factor that will ensure greatness for all peoples of the empire in the decades that follow. Where most debate arises among these poets is in attempting to determine the exact nature of this liberty and how to ensure its maintenance.

Closely related to, but distinct from, the dual vision is a key trope representing Britain as the rightful inheritor of all the best virtues and qualities of Greece and Rome. This trope, which generally takes the form of arguing that Britain is the New Rome, suggests that this new empire is the rightful heir to the arts and learning of Ancient Rome, and represents a further distillation and refinement of its key values. At times, poets suggest (often literally) that liberty, with its roots in the polis state of Greece, has marched across the continent through Rome to find a home in England generally or even London specifically, and that, through the further expansion of liberty across the Atlantic, the empire will act rightfully and refine imperial practices only for the improvement of the conditions of its subjects. Such arguments place the evolution of liberty as the central force, ensuring further movement towards an ideal political state not only in England but across deep time. In other instances, poets participate in the mythological tradition that suggests that like Aeneas (who fled Troy in order to form Rome, per Virgil’s Aeneid), Brutus, a descendant of Aeneas, sailed out of the Mediterranean and settled in England, giving the British

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⁶ As Roy Flannagan notes in The Riverside Milton, “The implication is that [Milton], like Isocrates, is a brilliant orator even though he cannot, because of circumstances beyond his control, argue his case in person. Like Isocrates, Milton offers revolutionary reforms” (987).
people the quality of Trojan (and Roman) stock. By creating a direct lineage to both Rome and Greece, this myth has the effect of connecting the new empire to both the historical empires, but also into the poetic tradition that stretched from Homer and Virgil through to Milton. In depicting Britain as the rightful descendent of these powers, poets deemphasize the brutalities and other negative aspects of classical empires and present Britain as the refinement of the poorly executed political ideals at the heart of classical culture.

Other tropes within the poetics of liberty demonstrate a keen awareness that power and influence function much differently in the British Empire than they did in the empires of antiquity. In his much-anthologized ballad promoting the righteousness of the British Empire, “Rule Britannia,” James Thomson uses a repeated refrain to emphasize Britain’s naval power: “Rule Britannia, rules the waves:/ Britons never will be slaves.” As the refrain suggests, Britons of the period were quite aware, and in fact proud, of the strong role ships and naval might played in the functioning of Empire. Within the poetics of liberty, this substrain takes the form of envisioning and debating what it means to be an empire of the seas (as opposed to the territorial might of imperial precedents). The ships of the British Empire fueled commerce and industry by transporting goods and materials across vast expanses; they ensured prosperity by protecting British people and lands from other powers and those that would steal their wealth; and they transported the texts, peoples, and materials that helped spread British influence throughout the world.

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7 This too can be connected directly to Milton who, in his History of Britain, notes the lineage as being of symbolic importance, though it may be more rooted in myth than actual history: “For what though Brutus and the Trojan pretence were yeelded up, seeing they that first devis’d to bring us from some noble Ancestor were content at first with Brutus the Consul;...and by the same lighting on the Trojan Tales, in affectation to make the Britain of one original with the Roman, pitch’d there” (11).

8 Suvir Kaul, who places Thomson’s poem centrally in his argument within Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire, cites it as proof of the position that British poets envisioned for themselves: “Thus, ‘Rule, Britannia!’ is not simply evidence of the centrality of the nationalist concerns of contemporary poets; it is testimonial to the fact that poets in the long eighteenth century imagined poetry to be a unique and privileged literary form for the enunciation of a puissant (and plastic) vocabulary of nation, particularly one appropriate to a Britain proving itself (in fits and starts, to be sure) great at home and abroad” (5).
Atlantic world. In all these ways, poets found cause worth celebrating in the ships, their captains, and the common sailors who operated them. Where other empires needed martial might and grew powerful through territorial gains, the British Empire used the influence and power of its ships to wield control through interest and economics instead of through sword and steed (though the latter were still key). Yet, as with a number of the tropes catalogued here, there was a darker side that many saw and questioned throughout the Atlantic world, for often the ships turned from protection to oppression, or the goods transported were enslaved humans. For these reasons, poets throughout the period continued to express their views through the careful deployment and coordination of naval and maritime symbols. In poems that support the imperial project and those that oppose it, ships provided a powerful symbol. Examining the ways these symbols evolve demonstrates not just how important ships and ocean faring were in the culture of the Atlantic world but also how citizens throughout the empire kept an open tie to maritime activities as a means of celebrating and critiquing imperial practices. Periodicals throughout the colonies kept strict records of maritime events: arrivals, departures, wrecks, and piracy all form a key interest in the reports of the day. This interest carries over into the poetry of the period.

As disparities of perspective between those who supported empire and those who opposed it continually widened across the eighteenth century, the trope that epitomizes these differences (which are often those between colonizer and colonized) is *translatio studii*. As identified in Eric Cheyfitz’s *The Poetics of Imperialism*, a new poetics arose in the eighteenth century that authorized the colonial project on the assumption that the expansion of empire facilitated the cultivation of civility. As he describes, “In the beginning (of history), so this story goes, was the nation-state, and its primal act was to translate itself into colonial forms. The medieval theory of *translatio imperii et studii*, with its vision of a universal empire with a
universal language, putatively Latin, is adapted here to a world after Babel, one of burgeoning and competing nationalisms with their vernaculars” (111). This ideal, that in expanding imperial power, the nation-state can spread learning and cultivation (both literally in its language and figuratively in its ideas) becomes a matter of central debate in the poetry of the Atlantic world. This idea authorizes the exportation of British culture and the usurpation of territories, peoples, and resources in the name of spreading “arts and learning.” The ways in which the empire should respect or replace local cultures as it expands into new territories was in constant debate across the eighteenth century. Poets of the period frequently confront the role of translation, both literal and figurative, within empire and how its practice is emblematic of other imperial policies. As Colleen Glenney Boggs notes in her examination of the practices of translation in early America, translation becomes “a form of cultural domination in which scholarship went hand in hand with imperial appropriation” (29). Such appropriation, of materials, ideas, and peoples, is the most hotly contested process of empire in the Atlantic world, with poets discussing when such work is collaborative and when it is clearly exploitative, competing dynamics which empire harnesses in the expansion of its interests.

With a clear sense of these dominant tropes in this poetics, it becomes possible to reconfigure the key arguments and perspectives on imperial politics in an array of important debates. But beyond this, the poetics of liberty offer a useful heuristic for tracking the ways in which imperial subjects participate and/or are affected by the primary political movements across the century. Thus, having identified this set of significant tropes that make up the poetics of liberty (dual vision, the progression of liberty, England as the new Rome, the empire of the seas, and translatio studii) I trace the political dialectic across multiple issues of debate and also across the decades. Examining the evolution and reconfiguration of these tropes allows for
greater insight into the changes in perspective on the imperial project and the splintering of these views into completely different arguments. This change, while slow and polyvalent, proves to be dramatic by the end of the century. While there is little debate about the larger trajectory of these changes, this examination of the poetics of liberty creates a more detailed account of the incremental steps that precipitate the political upheaval of the age of revolution. What I document in this project is how form, content, and context are united in the poetry of the Atlantic world and demonstrate, when examined over time, the processes of democratization through which the practices of exclusion and separation are eventually, in some limited fashion, turned into avenues of authorization and participation, allowing for an expanding field of public discourse that will shape and influence nations around the Atlantic through the twentieth century. In other words, this dissertation provides one model through which to reconstruct the continuity that exists across this period of rupture, to see this as an evolving trend instead of a singular shift. Furthermore, this helps improve our understanding of the British diaspora and the ways in which “Britishness” decayed with varying speed and intensity in varied localities of North America and the Caribbean. By reexamining the half-life of this cultural influence, it becomes possible to see the cultural roots of the dramatic historical events that occur towards the end of the century.

To return briefly to “Typographia,” the Markland poem with which I opened, we can now identify how the central message of the poem uses the tropes of the poetics of liberty to forward its specific view on empire. Note the presence of these tropes in the following idealized account of the imperial relationship:

“Oh Happy envy’d Isle,

“Sea-Wall’d Commander of EUROPA’S Trade,

(Mournful VIRGINIA, sighing said)
“Plac’d in thy Sovereign’s Smile,
(“Who, where his genial Rays appear,
“Productive of a fruitful year.
“The lab’ring Hind’s most greedy Hopes does bless)
“Does a diffusive course of Goodness run,
“And ripens all thy Hopes into Success.
“When I—and yet thy eldest Foreign Care—
“Am numb’d with Winters cold and bare,
“And Toilsome Summers Fruitless Harvests share.
“Oh Happy were my Lot,
“Would that kind Sun dispense
“On me a nearer Ray of his mild Influence!
“I see his Light, I guess his Warmth,—I feel it not. (8)

Within the lines of this brief apostrophe to England itself, Markland employs a range of tropes that had, even by 1732, become common to poetic expression throughout the Atlantic world. The opening lines place clear emphasis on Britain’s dominance being derived from its position in marine power and commerce, the “Sea-Walled Commander of EUROPA’S Trade,” while the organizing symbol of the passage, light, is widely used here and elsewhere in the poetry of the Atlantic world to represent the arts and learning that often travel in the wake of British mercantile ships (or so the poets would have us believe). The picture painted of the colonial relationship is certainly rosy, as Virginia only suffers due to a lack of direct contact, and yearns only for further European involvement, which the arrival of the printing press should help facilitate. Later in the poem, as may be expected, Britain grants Virginia’s request in the form of
Lieutenant Governor William Gooch (to whom the ode is dedicated) who appears in the verse as universally admired: “He came, He saw, and was belov’d; / Like Lightning quick, but strong, / and universal Gladness mov’d / Throughout th’ admiring Throng.” Here, as in heroic commerce, the politician is raised in verse to the heights of Julius Caesar. It is doubtful that any imperial bureaucrat received such praise universally, but here the tropes of liberty are marshaled in unwavering support. While the continual fear of the uncultured masses (here labelled as a “throng”) presents itself once more, they are again regulated, organized, and controlled both by the press and within the form of the poem itself. In this continued praise of Lieutenant-Governor Gooch, Markland makes the strong argument for the centrality of the printing press in the functioning of empire. While his views are unabashedly idealized, they demonstrate an understanding of empire that permeates much poetry of the period, a clear endorsement of translatio studii.

The poem ends with a clear pronouncement of how Virginia and other lands will continue to thrive due to the generosity and greatness of Gooch and, by extension, Britain. “Saturnian Reigns shall be renew’d, / Truth, Justice, Vertue, be pursu’d, / Arts flourish, Peace shall crown the Plains, / Where GOOCH administers, AUGUSTUS reigns.” The occasion of the printing press has now been extended both to the contemporary powers that govern and beyond to an endorsement of the imperial project as a whole. The poet envisions the further extension of the

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9 Markland notes in his dedication to Gooch that the only objection other Virginians would have to his poem is that it fails to capture the fullness of Gooch’s greatness: “I have said nothing herein, which, I am confident, will not be readily assented to, by all who have the Happiness to live under the present administration, in this Colony: Unless, perhaps, this Exception be taken, that where a disinterested and unprejudic’d PATRIOTISM, (for I will not be asham’d of the word) of a Governor to his People, and a reciprocal Affection and Obedience of them to Him is to be describ’d, the Author of this Piece may have wanted a Scale of Thought and Comprehension equal to the height of the Merits of the One, or the cordial Duty of the other; and that on such a subject it were better to be silent, than to say too little” (III-IV).

10 Augustus here and elsewhere in the poem represents King George II, the ruling monarch. It should be noted that, in the effusiveness of his praise, Markland shares many qualities with Dryden who, like Milton, used poetry to address matters of politics but was more admiring of the monarchy.
empire into “Climates now Unknown,” to the improvement of metropole and colony alike. This empire, informed by liberty and the core virtues listed, will bring about a reign of peace and prosperity not seen since the golden age of Rome (the “Saturnian Reigns”), and arts will similarly expand and flourish. Clearly the poet grants the political project of the empire his endorsement, but does so while demonstrating an understanding of how trade, arts, and governance are at work in the Atlantic. In this way, a simple poem of no particular individual renown gains particular resonance by situating itself within the larger discourse of empire. The poem, while highly occasional, tempers its argument carefully to project backward to the classical age, and forward into a new golden age of British liberty.

While my earlier characterization of the field of Atlantic studies’ engagement with poetry was broadly accurate, the argument of this dissertation has been formed in large part in conversation with the work of certain scholars already engaged with the poetry of the period. Poetry of the eighteenth century has not received as much critical attention as other genres, but there have been some sustained studies on the role of poetry in public discourse, particularly as it relates to empire. David S. Shields’s *Oracles of Empire* focuses primarily on how poetry produced in British North America participates in shaping public opinion of both economic and political imperial policies. Shields’s greatest contribution, besides his substantial archival work, is a cataloging of the literary typology of mercantilism. Shields’s work demonstrates that the production of poetry via belles lettres and club manuscripts was an essential presence in public discourse, and as such, reflects not only opposing perspectives on particular practices, but the overall shifting perspective of British America’s growing dissent towards empire as the myth of the New Rome fades in the increasing presence of an empire that limits individual freedom. While this project draws much from Shields’s recovery work and his typology, it will also
recognize that it is important that these poems of empire are not isolated from poetry on the other topics of public debate that utilize similar tropes and themes to much different ends, or from the concurrent discourse in other Atlantic spaces with which it participates in conversation (both directly and indirectly). The evolution of the image of empire espoused by the poetry of British North America feeds continually on the increasing discourses surrounding slavery, interactions with peoples in border regions, and questions of liberty that pervade all parts of the imperial project. Poetry, as the dominant mode of creative expression in the period (both in cultural value and volume), provides a record of the evolutions of these perspectives on empire and liberty that is both more varied and more complete than that provided by narratives and nonfiction writings. Thus, as Shields argues, explorations of the central questions of transatlantic studies will remain incomplete until the wide array of poetry produced throughout the Atlantic is considered fully.

Situated on the opposite side of the Atlantic, Suvir Kaul’s *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire* explores the ways in which English poets exerted influence in shaping the popular perception of the British Empire and its policies within the metropole. Like Shields, Kaul documents how poetry is used simultaneously to elevate the British Empire, and to promote the key differences between the modern empire and those of antiquity. As Kaul argues, the poets of the period play a dynamic and integral role in getting domestic popular opinion behind the mercantile practices through emphasizing that this new form of empire is based in liberty and expanded via commerce and not war or violent subjugation (placing it in direct contrast with the contemporary practices of the Spanish). Yet, Kaul is careful to temper this with the misgivings English poets have not just over the success of the empire, but over the accuracy of this view, misgivings that will eventually evolve in Britain into the push for abolition and other political and social reforms. As he argues, “The poets act locally—they take sides on topical matters,
argue domestic agendas—but think globally. They wrote poetry of contemporary globalization, tracing its contours in a paranoid or celebratory vein, or usually in a combination of both” (18). Beyond this, in the poetry of the Atlantic, the nature of liberty within the machinations of empire is a central focus not only in the metropole, but increasingly in the colonies as the eighteenth century continues to see increases in mercantilist policies and the (violent and nonviolent) subjugation of foreign peoples. While neither Kaul nor Shields deny the interplay of ideas across the Atlantic, neither has attempted to fully account for the nature of this discourse, which is the approach this project will take. By placing these important perspectives in conversation with each other, and with a careful consideration of canonical and recovered poetry, this dissertation establishes the ways in which poetry participated in the formation and circulation of ideas and values that create a discourse in liberty that would inform and authorize the political and social upheaval of the late eighteenth century.

Finally, Edward Cahill, in his examination of the relationship between discourses of liberty and aesthetic theory has provided an invaluable overview of the interplay between aesthetics and politics. In Liberty of the Imagination, Cahill argues that this eighteenth-century dialectic on liberty represents a prolonged nascent discussion of aesthetic theory and the ways in which affiliations and ideals provided a universality that existed beyond and above political distinctions (10). Noting the political dynamics of such discussions, Cahill provides a definition of liberty that demonstrates the central focus of many poets in the period: “A language of liberty, [articulated] a persistent expression not only of individuality, autonomy, and agency but also their necessary limits” (5). This definition guided much of my own thinking on the concept as it is expressed from Milton onward. That is, when these poets engage with the concept of liberty, they are participating in processes that plumb the depths to which an individual’s liberty must be
maintained, but also the necessary limitations that must be in place to assure the continued functioning of political and social order. This also speaks to those who write and read the poems in the open market. While Cahill’s discussion benefits from a sustained engagement with essays from the period, by extending his frameworks into the domain of poetry, I am able to present a more nuanced discussion of the dynamics at work throughout the period. That is, while essayists continued to refine their own understanding of liberty through continued engagement with the concept and each other’s perspectives, poets furthered the discussion by increasingly turning towards philosophies of the aesthetic and inculcating artistic dimensions of liberty in the imaginations of their readership. By considering the arguments forwarded by Shields, Kaul, and Cahill, as representing single strands in an increasingly interwoven public discourse, this dissertation presents a way in which a fully realized analysis of Atlantic poetry can further our understanding of the processes of empire and their influence on the subjectivity of individuals throughout the project. By focusing each chapter on a particular segment of the imperial populace, I will demonstrate how the application of this analysis furthers our understanding of the period.

The chapters of this dissertation each focus on a different segment of political discourse in which the poets of the Atlantic use the poetics of liberty to authorize positions on complex political, social, and economic debates. The chapters, while arranged in a roughly chronological fashion, are chronologies in themselves, tracking significant areas of debate in imperial policies including the rise of mercantilism, the treatment of indigenous peoples, slavery, and revolution. Each chapter seeks to demonstrate how poetry was used as a rhetorical tool in each debate and the ways in which poetry forwarded and was forwarded by political discourse. Poets of the period saw their craft as a means of giving form to formless ideas and new revelations of
expansion. Each chapter draws from canonical and archival texts to demonstrate the registers in which each debate occurred, and the pervasiveness of political thought across traditional divisions of class, race, gender, and locality. Each chapter, while forwarding a specific argument about the nature of poetic discourse on the focus topic, contributes to the larger narrative of how the poetics of liberty shape public opinion on the empire across the century and how shifts in those views facilitate the rise of the nation.

Chapter One begins the discussion of the poetics of liberty by focusing on John Milton and the ways in which his entry into political discourse through poetry set the terms of engagement that would guide and influence poets throughout the Atlantic world. There is abundant evidence to suggest that Milton was highly influential not just in England, but in political thought throughout North America, including sales records of his work, the journals of prominent revolutionary thinkers (particularly John Adams), and R.W. Griswold’s famous statement, “Milton is more emphatically American than any author who has lived in the United States” (quoted in Stevens 1). However, the exact role of Miltonic ideals in the formation of the republic has long been a subject of debate amongst literary scholars. While such studies have primarily focused on the influence of Milton on the revolutionary thinkers of the late eighteenth century and the writers of emerging American literature in the nineteenth century, this chapter traces the specific role of Milton in establishing the terms of poetic political discourse and creating a public attuned to such expression. Any sustained engagement with the poetry of the transatlantic eighteenth century displays the fingerprints of Milton throughout the poetry produced and the ways in which poets engage in political and social debates. This chapter uses the poetic and political writings of Milton, as well as accounts of his reception throughout Atlantic spaces, to understand the ways in which Milton authorizes poets to participate in
contemporary political debates, giving poetry a particularly potent presence in the discourse of clubs and coffeehouses.\textsuperscript{11} In \textit{Paradise Lost}, eighteenth-century poets found an endorsement of personal liberty superseding all external powers, a poetic form in which political expression found authorization through art, and a stern warning that an imbalance between the greed and ambition of one individual and that of the communal society can cause widespread ruin and suffering—all of which would become important to emergent imperial discourse in the opening decades of the eighteenth century. Milton, by merging his own sociopolitical views into an account based on events in scripture and tempered with classical allusions, provides a model of the triangulation I spoke of above. His artistry authorizes his politics and his politics inform his creativity. Milton thus provided the tools for a century of poets to follow, founding a poetics of liberty that would stretch across the Atlantic and enable, if not require, the participation of poets in political discourse on matters both occasional and systemic. Additionally, this chapter examines how poets on all sides of the Atlantic work to reproduce Milton’s dual vision of neoclassicism and future political promise as they understand the role of the British Empire through the examples of Greece and Rome, but as imbued with unique qualities that ensure its success. Finally, by tracing Milton’s influence throughout the eighteenth century, this chapter closes by explaining the appropriation of Miltonic ideals from his political writings (particularly \textit{Areopagitica}) in the shift from empire to nation and the rise of democratic liberty.

Chapter two, “Imperial Entanglements: Patriotism, Mercantilism, and Heroic Commerce in Pastoral and Georgic Poetry of the Atlantic,” examines the ways in which poets of the Atlantic world created a vision of empire within the public imagination through the idealized deployment

\textsuperscript{11} This conception of the public sphere is built from the well-known theories of Jürgen Habermas (\textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere}); however, like other scholars throughout Atlantic studies, I am looking to correct flaws in the theory that have emerged since its inception, particularly those that mark it as too simplistic a model of how intellectual response and critique function.
of the poetics of liberty. At the heart of this chapter is an examination of the transformation of the classical genres of pastoral and georgic in light of the changing landscapes of British commerce. As shepherds became sailors, agriculture became commerce, and farmers became plantation owners, these traditional genres changed to encompass a vastly different landscape, and the way in which many poets positioned themselves and their texts codified a vocabulary through which views on empire, commerce, and subjectivity would be expressed through the age of revolutions. This chapter opens with an examination of Alexander Pope’s “Windsor-Forest,” a poem occasioned by commerce (the signing of the treaty of Utrecht) and the ways in which it forges many of the key tropes that will form the poetics of liberty moving forward. The poem, occasioned by the expansion of commerce, and more troublingly, the slave trade, represents a major step in the evolution of the British poetic tradition. After examining a variety of archival sources that further refine the common tropes, including heroic commerce, the empire of the seas and the myth of the new Rome, the chapter uses James Grainger’s The Sugar-Cane to demonstrate the extent to which commerce, and its staple crops, are used by poets to present an idealized vision of empire, strategically de-emphasizing what makes such crops possible (i.e. slavery). Through these critiques, that poetry played a critical role in the early period of the empire by expanding public imagination and coordinating a fantasy of possibility across political and economic systems.

However, as the empire continued to expand in the midcentury, it became increasingly apparent that the space that colonists and merchants entered into was not homogenous empty space but was in fact occupied by native peoples, forces of competing imperial powers, and representatives of non-state institutions (primarily religious missionaries, such as the Jesuits). The complex web of relations, codependence, and conflict caused a dramatic shift in how empire
was conceived and authorized, and spurned a large debate over how policies needed to be refined. In these contexts, empire became a means of coordinating and organizing these separate nations within a system of mutual benefit (instead of the mercantilist system for economic gains). In chapter three, “Binding Serialities: Imperiography in the Poetry of the Atlantic,” I argue that poetry played a fundamental role in establishing this view of empire. Building on Ed White’s theory of imperiography, I argue that poetry, by increasing the public’s awareness of the serial communities that operated in a separate but parallel fashion, dramatically shifted how empire was represented and its role in the New World. This chapter examines a wide range of representations of natives from many sources and concludes with an examination of James Ralph’s *Zeuma: or the Love of Liberty*, and how it creates a serial nation that has existed in deep time to authorize the British empire’s colonial activity as a means of not only enriching Britain, but improving the lives of native communities (and rescuing them from the oppressive rule of the Spanish). This portrayal rests on a double triangulation among native, Spanish, and English, but also among classical, contemporary, and projected forms of empire.

While the poetics of liberty shape a variety of discourses surrounding the imperial project, as the century progresses it became increasingly difficult for poets to justify the policies of empire insomuch as it is a system that propagates the enslavement and forced migration of an increasingly large population of individuals. While even the earliest actions of empire were supported by the work of indentured and slave laborers, by the 1760s and 1770s, the poetics of liberty came into sharp conflict with the institution of slavery and the cruelty and suffering enslaved Africans (and others to a lesser extent) experienced in the New World. Chapter four, “‘Half Hell is in their Song’: The Poetics of Liberty in Poems of Slavery,” examines the conflict between discourses of liberty and the nature of slavery. Using the poems of slave owners,
abolitionists, and current and former slaves, I argue that in light of the realities of slavery, poets found themselves unable to forward the traditional arguments for empire and needed to reinterpret the poetics of liberty in order to account for the vast population of enslaved Africans. This reinterpretation, which occurs across political and generic dynamics, reconfigured the poetics of liberty to endorse the abolitionist cause and give access to the first poets of color in the Atlantic world. Whichever side the individual poet takes on the issue, the arguments are framed in the pre-established vocabulary of the poetics of liberty and demonstrate that, though the terms of political subjectivity change and are far from uniformly conceived, the terms through which the debate occurs shows that far from rejecting the poetics of liberty established by earlier poets, poetry of and about slavery uses the very same tropes to reinterpret and amend the role and significance of liberty. For these poets the pre-established terms of the poetics of liberty enhance their ability to forward more specific arguments concerning slavery.

Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the legacy of the poetics of liberty and some gestures towards its role in post-revolutionary America. As nation replaces empire and the politics of revolution turn toward governance, the poets of the emerging nation turned to the familiar language of the poetics of liberty in order to distinguish themselves from England, and, to a lesser extent, classical powers. The works of Phillis Wheatley, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Walt Whitman demonstrate that the tropes of empire are not emptied of meaning in the national period, but instead retain the symbolic power needed to again demonstrate difference and facilitate a renewed discussion about the nature, function, and power of liberty.
Chapter One: “The Known Rules of Antient Libertie”: Milton and the Poetics of Liberty

In Sonnet XII, first published in the 1673 edition of his Poems, Milton offers his readers an explanation for his previous writings on the subject of divorce and an assertion of the centrality of such freedom to the personal liberties of the English people. As always, Milton imbues the explanation with resonances that reach across the body of his work and encapsulate his role as a poet articulating a new vision of the English people:

I did but prompt the age to quit their cloggs
By the known rules of antient libertie,
When strait a barborous noise environs me
Of Owles and Cuckoes, Asses, Apes and Doggs.
As when tho’se Hinds that were transform’d to Froggs
Raild at Latona’s twin-born progenie
Which after held the Sun and Moon in fee.
But this is got by casting Pearl to Hoggs;
That bawle for freedom in their senseless mood,
and still revolt when truth would set them free.
Licence they mean when they cry libertie;
For who loves that, must first be wise and good;
But from that mark how far they roave we see
For all this wast of wealth, and loss of blood. (Milton 251)

The sonnet, written in 1646 as the English Civil War loomed over public consciousness, demonstrates Milton’s engagement with public discourse and the conflicted relationship that he
had with the general public. Writing primarily in defense of his previous political writings (particularly *Tetrachordon* and the other divorce tracts) which had been poorly received by his contemporaries, Milton uses an angry tone to reject the criticism and put down those that offered it as being unworthy of his writing. The opening lines announce the purpose of all these writings as the freedom of all from the “cloggs” that bind them, cloggs being both a reference to contemporary slavery (shackles used to impede movement of slaves) and to the economic inequality that dominated the country (the wooden shoes most common with peasants). As always, the route to such freedom is, to Milton, found outside the modern world, as “antient libertie” refers to the natural rights of man that have since been estranged from man. Such liberty is not mysterious or undefined, but rather fits into the “known rules” that Renaissance humanists had rediscovered.

The primary distinction of the sonnet relies on the separation of beasts from man, and by extension, true discourse from false or uncivilized discourse. Milton consistently characterizes those who oppose his views with animalistic traits. The noise made by his critics is both “Barborous” and a “bawle,” markers of alien or false discourse. They are also directly equated to “Owles and Cuckoes, Asses, Apes and Doggs,” animals that either in sound, appearance, or temperament approach human qualities but fail to overcome their bestial nature. Thus, while Milton writes in order to bring liberty to his audience, there are many amongst them who are unworthy or incapable of reaching this level. This tension characterizes much of Milton’s poetry and prose, as he seems intent on improving the minds of all individuals, but recognizes that a few are incapable of such enlightenment. Here and elsewhere, Milton works to open up political discourse, but limits it directly to terms of his choosing, chief amongst which is an elevated state of education.
If Milton views his discourse as separate and higher than that of his contemporaries, the question is then what separates his form of public expression from that of others. While the barbarous and uncivil qualities of others provide one answer, the second quatrain of the poem offers a second. In these four lines, Milton combines two specific allusions, one classical and one Biblical, how his views are authorized by both the quality of the writing that produces them, and by the cultural inheritance they represent:

As when those Hinds that were transform’d to Froggs
Raild at Latona’s twin-born progenie
Which after held the Sun and Moon in fee.
But this is got by casting Pearl to Hoggs; (251)

Both of the allusions invoke scenes that emphasize exclusion and the proper use of discourse. The former, the myth of Latona, refers to the goddess Latona’s supplication of common peasants, and the punishment their cruelty wrought. Having birthed twins (Apollo and Diana) of Zeus, Latona fled the wrath of Hera through arid lands and begged to drink from a spring occupied by peasants for the sake of her and the infants she nursed. “I have come / to exercise what is a public right; / nevertheless, it’s as a suppliant / that I am here to beg this gift from you” (Ovid VI.499-502). Spurning her supplications, the peasants, out of “no other motive than pure meanness” (VI.522), deny her and churn the water to prevent her being able to drink. In retribution, the peasants are turned to frogs and Latona pronounces, “now, as in the past, they exercise / their foul tongues in shameless quarreling, / and even underwater, utter curses” (VI.535-7). Thus, the unworthy are denied the right of public expression and allowed only noise, not speech.
The final line of the quatrain, “But this is got by casting Pearl to Hoggs” refers to Matthew 7:6 in which Jesus instructs his disciples to share what is holy with those who are worthy. Again using the separation of man and beast, Jesus instructs “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.” As the verse makes clear, those incapable of understanding wisdom will spurn it as an animal would sacred symbols or wealth. Milton, by mixing the two here, crafts a message of specific meaning that has both classical and Biblical precedence. Milton links himself to the wisdom and refinement that knowledge of these texts allows, a message only accessible to those with similar learning.

The sonnet demonstrate the core attribute of Milton’s poetic vision: a focus on the future enabled by true liberty that is authorized and tempered by a consideration of historical, classical, precedents. This call for liberty is one that Milton makes only to those who, like him, have been awakened to the possibilities of liberty as revealed in the learning of Renaissance humanism, an assertion that the allusion to the myth of Latona and Jupiter reflects. While Milton envisions himself as a poet both capable of and responsible for enlightening the masses whom truth would set free, there remains a lingering anxiety about the worthiness of his contemporaries to accept this knowledge. The concern at the heart of this conflict is not simply for himself or for the public, but rather for the relationship between the two. Milton recognizes himself as having reached a higher truth, but also knows that his intellect has a very public role to play both in contemporary affairs and in the shaping of British character for years to come. Milton demonstrates a dual vision, gaining enlightenment and authority from gesturing backward toward classical learning, but focusing this learning forward to bring greater liberty to his contemporaries and help Britain rise above classical societies. By returning the public to a clear
sense of ancient liberty, Milton wants to eliminate the separation that modernity has brought
between man and his natural freedom. Modern liberty, though different, is possible yet.

The conclusion of Sonnet XII continues to support the exclusion of those unworthy of
freedom. Milton argues that the real failure of his critics is that of misunderstanding the true
nature of freedom: “Licence they mean when they cry libertie. / For who loves that, must first be
wise and good.” Again, Milton links the values of knowledge to being able to attain full personal
liberty. This reflects not only the looming English Civil War in Milton’s period, but also the
continual fear by scholars of the Enlightenment that, though political subjectivity and liberty
should be expanded to all, the general populace at this time will need further guidance and
instruction on how to pursue liberty through their innate morals. This anxiety, which continues
into the early decades of the American republic, suggests a public sphere that should be both
inclusive, but also must necessarily work for the continued improvement and education of all, so
that everyone may participate properly in the functioning of liberty. Milton envisions himself and
his critics on opposite sides of this divide and, within the imagery and form of his poem,
constructs a discourse that can act as both enlightenment and instruction.

Milton enters into public discourse at the exact moment that the authority and power of
traditional sacred and secular power begins to wane. That is, as the authorities that had long
dominated discourse demonstrate “from that mark how far they roave,” new dynamics of social
relations and of public discourse rise into this space to assert greater power. Milton emerges into
the nascent Habermasian public sphere at a moment when it becomes possible for an individual
to exercise authority based purely on his or her own rhetorical abilities. Authorized by nothing
other than his own thinking and his crafted ability to express it, Milton enters into public
discourse at a moment of rupture in English society and culture, and as Nancy Armstrong and
Leonard Tennenhouse have asserted, becomes an attractive model of the author figure, standing as a clear figure of continuity across this point of rupture between periods, literary movements, and political eras (27-46). Some critics fit Milton easily alongside the Renaissance humanists who embody England prior to the revolution; yet, for others, Milton directly anticipates romanticism and the political ideals that will form the basis for revolutions around the Atlantic world by the end of the eighteenth century. Thus, while Milton acts as an attractive bridge over the flux of the commonwealth era, the same complications and tensions that this represents also create great difficulty in defining the dominant mode of Milton’s work, and the worldview to which he ascribed. This manifests itself in the majority of Milton’s work, as we see him operating within genres and forms of antiquity both to affirm the power of these forms and simultaneously to rewrite them, at once demonstrating their potency while advocating for their adaptation and revision.

The term “dual vision,” describes how Milton situates his works between the classical and the modern, identifies Milton’s rhetorical strategies, in both poetry and prose, that sanction his arguments, aesthetics, and the forceful presence that he will have in the poetry of the eighteenth century. This dual vision envisions a better age through the pursuit of liberty, and a return to the values of the classical world. This manifests itself textually in *Paradise Lost* as we see Milton both mourning for the lost golden age of Eden as well as presenting a prolonged prophecy given to Adam by Michael, that envisions an elevated future (including the colonial project within it). In prose, when crafting an argument for the centrality of the freedom of the press in the preservation of English liberty in the *Areopagitica*, Milton frames the whole of the argument within a classical metaphor, justifying the practice through a clear insistence that it aligns England with ancient Greece. To Milton, the path to political identity originates in the
ancient world and the responsibility lies on his shoulders of him and those of his contemporaries to transmit and translate “antient libertie” for modern England.

Armstrong and Tennenhouse identify a significant conflict in Milton scholarship, that between the poet and the politician, which dominates conceptualizations of the figure of Milton throughout criticism from the 17th century onward: “The debate over which—politician or poet—defines the true Milton has set the political inflexibility of the puritan moralist against the extraordinary learning and artistic virtuosity of the Renaissance humanist. It has also placed the regicidal pamphleteer in contention with the poet of Christian forgiveness” (9). These conflicts lead Armstrong and Tennenhouse to conclusions (via Roland Barthes) about the status of Milton as a myth that is both “imperfectible and unquestioned” (13). While I agree that these tensions seem contradictingly to elevate and undermine Milton’s authority, I deny the implicit assertion that to understand Milton is to engage only with one side of this dichotomy. While Armstrong and Tennenhouse argue that it is the contradiction within Milton that gives him privileged status as an author, I would suggest that it is the convergence of the dynamics, rather than the tension between them, which gives Milton’s legacy its potency in the decades and centuries after his death. Particularly in the eighteenth century, although other poets may approach Milton through either his politics or his aesthetics, it is the merging of the two within the figure that will prove to be most influential to those who attempt to replicate his model of public discourse. As I discussed in my introduction, to see aesthetics and political discourse as separate spheres is to misread the dominant cultural trends of the eighteenth century. Those who follow in Milton’s wake will use poetry to enter into political discourse, debating everything from the nature of human will, to the morality of eighteenth-century imperial commercial practices, and even the efficacy of specific tariffs and officials. While I do not deny that these are seemingly competing
values—adherence to the art of poetic expression or to the immediate practical matters of politics—in many respects, these are the precise values that make up Milton’s dual vision. To look to the classical in order to inform the politics of the present and future is also to look at one’s cultural inheritance and learning in order to form your immediate perspective (the values at the core of Renaissance humanism). As imitators and successors of various quality on both sides of the Atlantic will demonstrate, it is this aspect of Milton that they seek to recreate as a means of entering into contemporary political discourse over liberty, political identification, and subjectivity. In this sense, the aesthetics and learning of Renaissance humanism and the political views reflected in Milton (which oscillate between progressivism and conservatism) are more symbiotic than contradictory: aesthetic quality authorizes political discourse and political discourse in turn shapes the themes and forms that raise the aesthetic quality.

Promoting Milton as the only author, or even as the only influential thinker, who formulated contemporary political views with this same dual vision would be anachronistic and factually wrong. It is only through communal engagement in these debates that Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities subsume the authority once held by sacred and monarchical authorities. Placing Milton and his revolutionary contemporaries at the forefront of this movement gets closer to the historical record, as it is their actions that begin to cause a systemic political rethinking of the function of the self, both common and regal, within the community, nation, and empire. Armstrong and Tennenhouse argue that Milton’s model for participation in public discourse created in his readership a language that “individuated the subject and situated his body within the state and yet enclosed his mind in a personal world which limited the powers of state” (42). Armstrong and Tennenhouse note the mediation of obligations to political discourse and the self. The proper subject is one with the capacity (and liberty) to regulate his or
her own thoughts and actions within the functioning of the state. These categories, in the case of Milton, resulted in his dual vision, but are eclipsed in impact by this legacy of the “individuated subject.” The individuated subject is the free thinker who participates in public discourse and finds, in the poetics of liberty, a means of informing the state through the dialectic of political change. It is this legacy that will blossom in the eighteenth century into a wide class of poets who will attempt to similarly blend their own pursuit of aesthetic truth and beauty with concerted meditations on the ever-shifting policies of empire, and their effect on individual subjects. This emergent class of thinkers, while clearly privileged in their ability to abstain from physical labor and live amongst ideas in an enclosed mind, will not be wholly separated from the extension of liberty to all. By inspiring this class of thinkers and writers, Milton pushes the cause of liberty into the hands of the period’s intellectuals.

This chapter explores the roots of this “individuated mind” as a direct result of the convergence of the poetic and political dimensions of Milton’s public persona, and the prose and verse works through which this persona is formed. This is not to say that there was a single reaction to or understanding of Milton and his political and social affiliations that dominated the whole of his lifetime or the early years of legacy. Yet it is in this period that Milton’s works and acts, constructed a model for the “wise and good,” individuated minds that will “break their cloggs” and reshape the world through English liberty. The most salient, though certainly not universal, characteristic of these individuated minds, their dual vision, relies on the codependent relationship between envisioning an improved society, and understanding the debt that society owes to the world of classical learning. Arguments for the improvement of the individuated subject’s condition, made via broadside, poem, or oration, were grounded in an understanding of how the fundamental classical ideas could be improved, if not perfected, by the exercise of true
liberty in which the subject’s will and state policies act in harmony within the political state. In order to track these roots, I will make some brief comments on Milton’s biography before examining his early poems, *Paradise Lost*, and *Areopagitica* in detail.

The tension between public concerns and private ambitions was present throughout Milton’s life. While the romanticized image of Milton is that of a dedicated artist toiling towards higher truth in isolation, the facts of his biography demonstrate interdependence on the processes of commerce and politics throughout the seventeenth century. Milton himself is a product of the rising influence of commerce throughout the seventeenth century and the comfort that only a bourgeois lifestyle in this period would allow. Born in 1608, Milton was raised in a well-to-do mercantile neighborhood bordered on one side by St. Paul’s and on the other by the Royal Exchange. John Stow’s 1603 survey of London simply labels the neighborhood as “wholly inhabited by rich merchants” (qtd. in Hawkes 35). John Milton Sr. was a full participant in this boom of commerce, and particularly in the rising industries of debt and debt legislation. As Milton biographer David Hawkes states, “[John Milton Sr.] farmed money as his father had farmed land. He manipulated the new, mysterious power of financial value as his son would manipulate the signifying power of words” (27-8). The Milton home, “The Spreadeagle,” is reported to have been of such size and quality as to immediately demonstrate the wealth obtained through the patriarch’s work as a scrivener, legal clerk, and usurer. While popular images of Milton toiling within his family’s study with the pure zeal of a Renaissance humanist are not incorrect, they have to be placed within the larger frame of commerce, trade, and usury. Any isolation ascribed to Milton must be understood as dependent upon and as the product of the labor of others and the financial acumen of his father. Milton had the luxury of this wealth which gave him educational opportunities at St. Paul’s and Christ College, as well as a full five years,
1632-38, during which Milton lived off his father’s wealth and completed the bulk of his reading of classical literature.

Milton ended his period of study with a trip around Europe, funded by his father and often using business contacts for aid, and then return home to England on the eve of the civil war. Between 1638 and 1642, Milton used the literary reputation garnered from the publication of *Comus* (1637) and *Lycidas* (1638) to enter into the political discourse of the English Civil War. Publishing a variety of tracts on the role of the church and of the sovereign and the troubling overlap of these powers, Milton had an active role in political discourse long before the execution of the King and his appointment under Cromwell as Secretary of Foreign Tongues. Having published the official defense of the execution, *A Defence of the People of England*, Milton continued his political writings, meant both to inform and motivate the public towards greater personal liberty and habits, through to the restoration in 1660. Milton retired from his active political life and, after being pardoned for his role in the commonwealth government, composed *Paradise Lost* for the next six years, and continued composing poetry and political tracts through his death in 1674. *Paradise Lost* and the subsequent writings, though created in isolation and out of the direct public role Milton had previously held, do not represent a return to isolation, but instead a merging of his political and personal ambitions meant to inspire and instruct the burgeoning class of individuated subjects that the civil war had created, and that the restoration would not subdue. Thus, the figure that emerges is not one of isolation or at all distanced from contemporary events. Milton has a clear engagement with contemporary events throughout his life, even when his writing is operating far from the common everyday experience.
A major motivation in Milton’s public and private concerns is the assertion of the individuated self within the larger systems of economy and politics that govern social relations. Although Milton participated fully in many areas of public life, he was careful to maintain his own autonomy, particularly in regards to the ownership of his own labor, throughout his life. A major theme running throughout the political and poetic works concerns the natural freedom of all individuals, despite their dominant adherence to a type of slave mentality wherein they sacrifice liberty and labor to others. With generous revision of Aristotle, Milton formulated a perception that, since the Fall, humans had sunk into a state of “natural slavery” through labor that appropriated their acts and actions, turning them in to “person[s] whose own activity is alien to [them], because it belongs to another” (Hawkes 5). Hawkes further describes, this type of slavery, to which all humans were predisposed and vulnerable, denied humans the authentic experiences of the world by keeping them mired in the false signs (idols) of their own creation:

For Milton, the natural goal of empirical experience was to serve the purposes of a more profound reality. Properly understood, the physical world consists of images, of signs that designate metaphysical referents. But a natural slave will forget or ignore this and assume that the physical world is the proper end (in every sense) of his life. He will be unable to interpret signs, because he does not understand that it is the nature of signs to point to something beyond themselves (5-6).

This understanding of Milton’s worldview helps to reconcile his competing artistic and political goals, as it expresses the reality which the “individuated mind” must fight against. While his art can lead him closer to this “more profound reality,” there is an implicit concern to improve the conditions of others who are slaves unto themselves. Political views of those who are overly
concerned with the realm of signs will necessarily be formed around image and rhetoric instead of truth, liberty, and free will. The fight against the natural slavery of his contemporaries was not linked to the ongoing discourse of actual slavery, but instead focused on a type of secular idolatry which bent individuals towards goals within a realm of signs (such as wealth, property, and commerce) weighted too heavily in the priorities of the citizens. Milton made the breaking of these systems of signs a goal of all his work, and as such an iconoclast, would help reconfigure the systems of value and meaning across society, redirecting them towards a sense of liberty and an individuated self.

While this iconoclasm carries throughout the political writings and *Paradise Lost*’s emphasis on free will above all other affiliations, Milton was only able to condemn a life devoted to the false signs of money and commerce because of his own father providing for him. Just as Sonnet XII works to explain Milton’s desire to bring freedom and liberty to the masses while also betraying an antipathy towards those that are blinded by wealth, Milton’s larger iconoclasm is both an embrace and rejection of the public. While he rejects the motivations that have perverted the views of the public and alienated them from the fruits of their labor (in much the way usury separates wealth from labor), he adhere to the humanist belief that, when situated with proper understanding, individuals will work toward a higher good for all. To inspire individuals to act independently and with full foresight within the systems of signs that man has created, is, to Milton, an act that promotes the general welfare and a return to the ideas and freedom that were denied to humanity in the Fall. What results is an attractive amalgamation of politics, religion, art, classical ideals, and modern perspectives that raises Milton up as a model for participation in the public sphere and authorizes his articulation of the ideal future state of the

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12 Undoubtedly, the shadow of his father’s work in usury greatly informs this view.
English people specifically, and humanity at large. In this way, Milton’s concerns are both practical and immediate, as well as philosophical and general. It is his dual vision motivated by a concern for the individual within the increasingly complex systems of false signs and icons that is reflected throughout his writing before and after the civil war.

Milton’s early poetry is marked with many of the best-known features of his later work: classical allusions, themes of liberty and freedom, and a respect for, but innovation of, the genres of antiquity. The earliest poems, including “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” “Lycidas,” and many of his sonnets, are highly occasional works, inspired by specific events, particularly deaths. It was common for pupils at St. Paul’s and Christ’s College to compose poetic works to mark the passing of a current or former student (Such as Edward King, whose death inspired Milton’s “Lycidas”). These early poems, though certainly lacking the sophistication and resonance of *Paradise Lost*, do not remain anchored wholly in the occasion, but instead connect to grander themes and subjects that, while not unrelated, certainly offer much more than tribute or mourning. In the early poems, Milton demonstrates his ability to project forward and backward in his vision of England and his contemporaries, merging his classical education with political arguments.

Although the date of Sonnet X has not been determined with any finality, it made its first appearance in the 1645 edition of *Poems* and therefore is an early entry in the Milton canon. Like much of his early work, this poem is a tribute to a figure with whom Milton is familiar. In this case, Lady Margaret Ley was not a close friend of the poet, but rather a figure for whom he had great affection, if only passing social contact. As the poem details, Milton is an admirer of her father’s career and stature and offers this tribute to the praise the daughter gives her late father. It is a highly occasional poem, marking recent events in politics and public discourse, but Milton
gives it a touch of classical beauty and wider resonance that help it to rise above the occasion. The poem is not just an encomium for the Lady Margaret, but is also a tribute to civic duty, its admirable performance, and the role that duty plays in ensuring liberty.

Daughter to that God Earl, once President
Of England’s Counsel, and her Treasury,
Who liv’d in both, unstain’d with gold or fee,
And left them both, more in himself content,
Till the sad breaking of that Parliament
Broke him, as that dishonest victory
At Chaeronea, fatal to liberty
Kil’d with report that Old man eloquent,
Though later born, then to have known the dayes
Wherein your Father flourisht, yet by you
Madam, me thinks I see him living yet;
So well your words his noble vertues praise,
That all both judge you to relate them true,
And to possess them, Honour’d Margaret (88)

The opening quatrain of the poem sets the context for its readers in such a way as to indicate the subject to the audience without naming proper names. The address “to the daughter” frames the verse before immediately tipping towards praise for the public figure who, while holding multiple offices, “liv’d in both, unstain’d with gold or fee / And left them both, more in himself content.” He practices his civic duty selflessly for the good of England and the sake of the
citizenry, aligning the father, Sir James Ley, with the new types of heroism the modern world demands.

Milton describes the noble figure of the politician, presented here as a model for others in public life, as an individual who has freed himself from the oppressive use of signs. As described, he is “unstain’d by gold or fee,” and “more in himself content.” The ideal is not an individuated mind content pursuing truth in isolation from the system, but rather someone who can operate within the public sphere free of the greed that wealth can inspire. Milton sees Ley’s father as a kindred spirit: someone more interested in the liberty and the welfare of all than his personal reputation and well-being. While this is not an outright condemnation of material wealth, it certainly is an implicit tribute to this stronger source of motivation. The Earl has individuated himself within the system, and made a name for himself through participation in public discourse in the service of the people of England.

Having set his purpose in the opening quatrain, Milton uses the second to further hone his message and relate the greatness of the Earl to an analogous classical situation. By comparing recent history to antiquity, Milton demonstrates that his dual vision can authorize a conceptualization of contemporary events. The event referenced in the first line of the quatrain (“The sad breaking of that Parliament”), which would again be obvious to his contemporary readership, is the dissolution of the House of Commons ordered by Charles I in 1629. 13 The act by Charles I, retaliation for the house having passed resolutions against his policies, was a major step toward the English Civil War, and a clear sign to Milton of tyranny and the unwarranted assumption of power meant to further enslave the English people to the will of the King. To a

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13 As Merritt Y. Hughes notes in his annotations, the dissolution of the Parliament occurred on March 10, 1629 and marked “the first open breach between its leaders and the King” (142).
public servant as faithful to his duties as James Ley, the breaking of Parliament could only leave him similarly “broke.” Having previously been elevated by the King to the role of Earl of Marlboro, the breaking was both a personal and political blow to Ley’s spirit. As his cause was that of the exercise of the people’s will, the loss of the liberty to do so is a death knell, in essence if not in actuality. While the previous verse paragraph had made Milton’s praise clear, this equates Parliament and Ley directly, demonstrating the commitment a dutiful public presence should have to the country.

The second half of the quatrain, “Chaeronea, fatal to liberty / Kil’d with report that Old man eloquent,” refers to the defeat of a Greek force at the hands of Philip of Macedonia that resulted in the bondage of the Athenian and Theban people. Displaying his Renaissance humanist knowledge, Milton demonstrates that contemporary events should be understood in relation to their classical predecessors. In response to the battle and the loss of liberty in Greece, Isocrates, then 98, deliberately starved himself to death (Hughes 142). Isocrates was such a staunch supporter of liberty that he tied his own fate deliberately to that of his people. Milton, who will take his title and rhetorical situation in Areopagitica from Isocrates, invokes the figure to signify this type of devotion and loss. Milton’s classical allusion that effectively transforms Ley into a beacon for liberty and the act of Charles I into an act equal to a dramatic military victory. James Ley, who died four days after the dissolution of Parliament, was another victim in the cause of liberty. This is further punctuated by the use of more forceful and violent language including “dishonest,” “fatal,” “Kil’d,” and “report.” The conflict presented is that of liberty and oppression, and whether on the field of battle or the halls of Parliament, true heroism lies in the determination of the individual to stand against such oppression. The “Old Man eloquent,” a
beacon for liberty and for the enlightened mind, will fall in the face of such evil, but is a reminder of what is at stake in the conflict.

Crafting his meaning in this way, Milton is also actively shaping an audience receptive to his message and his tactics. While Milton’s allusions tendencies were certainly more culturally relevant to his contemporaries than to present day readers, they ask much of their audience, demanding widespread contemporary knowledge as well as a near-encyclopedic understanding of classical myth and history. Beyond this, his choice to use the sonnet form connects his thoughts to a tradition beyond the specific moment. As time goes on, Milton will only raise this cost of admission to his poetry. By doing so, Milton is deliberately setting up his own imagined community; he is selective about who should be able to participate in his discourse, and who will have access to its meaning. While he may be concerned with the liberty and welfare of all, the individuals whom he hopes to activate and inspire require a high level of knowledge in both classical learning and politics, that is, they must similarly draw together political discourse and art.

Line nine, in the fashion of the Italian sonnet form, marks a pivot from one subject to another (as it marks a shift from quatrains to triplets). In this case it marks a return from paying tribute to the father to praising the daughter, the titular figure of the poem: “Though later born, then to have known the dayes/ Wherein your Father flourisht, yet by you / Madam, me thinks I see him living yet.” By shifting focus from father to daughter, Milton also shifts from the past to the present across the generational divide that the pair represents. Yet he is unwavering in his commitment to the values that the career of the father represented and of which the daughter has now come to remind him. In the third of these three lines, Milton directly addresses the daughter formally, and offers that the heroism present in Isocrates and Ley remains present in her. In the
second line, the clear sense that the influence and power of the father diminished greatly in the years after the breaking of Parliament until his death, shows genuine sadness for the daughter not having seen her father in his glory. Yet the sadness expressed is reversed in the third line by the hopefulness of seeing the values remain in the hands of the daughter. This also effectively resolves the tension between the praise of the father in the first eight lines and the opening assertion in praise of the daughter.

From these lines, a definition of heroism comes into focus that itself is a merging of the public and private (and perhaps, an exceptional form of the individuated self). This strain or spirit that is reported to have passed from Isocrates through to James and finally Margaret is not the traditional heroism of classical myth. Milton has begun to rewrite the myths of antiquity to take the emphasis away from mighty deeds and focus instead on those heroes that adhere to the principles of freedom and liberty above all else. These noble deaths are not those of mighty warriors, but of principled men of service. As Virgil rewrote the history of Rome to emphasize the character of the individual above the heroism of military acts, so too is Milton appropriating figures of myth and reconfiguring them to emphasize the qualities he wants his society to value above all else: selflessness, liberty, and honor.

The final three lines complete this connection between father and daughter and demonstrate why faith in her father’s legacy is not unfounded: “So well your words his noble vertues praise, / That all both judge you to relate them true, / And to possess them, Honour’d Margaret.” Milton’s praise emphasizes her own rhetoric and communication of these values. While Milton attributes the political views of many to empty images and rhetoric, here he is willing to praise rhetoric underwritten by true values. Like the other figures of the poem, she is eloquent and dutiful with her own public discourse and therefore worthy of her father’s legacy.
Finally, through the sharing of these values she is seen by all as not only a true conduit for their presentation, but also an adherent to the values to a degree equal to her father. In the final line, the revelation of her name confirms to the audience the identity of whom Milton has been praising, but also functions within the poem as a pun, as her name resembles the Greek and Latin word for “pearl” and she is indeed a pearl of her father’s virtue and the epitome of his wisdom.

Milton here, as in many of his other short poems, draws the contemporary, classical, and ideal together in order to demonstrate a continuous thread that has shaped and will shape public discourse and decisions. The conflict between liberty and oppression is waged about the heroic figures that demonstrate the true nature of civic duty. These figures were, like Milton, empowered by their values and the ability to express them. The liberty expressed is that of individuals freed from the service of others and at liberty to pursue the values that motivate them. Milton sets all of these figures and acts against the background of a larger conflict in a manner akin to that of the battle of the Father and Satan as context for the events in Eden in *Paradise Lost*. As in Sonnet XII, there is a shadow looming over the poem which is only hinted at, and the coming conflict will hinge greatly on the heroism of individuals and the goodness of many.

The merging of contemporary and classical concerns focuses on the presence of the unfettered, intellectually free individual. Working as such an individual, Milton provides a model to others of how to merge the best qualities of the Renaissance and the emerging modern age in pursuit of real ideals. If his greatest fear, as Hawkes would have us believe, is idolatry, Milton demonstrates here what those in pursuit of higher ideals are able to accomplish. However, he is not merely raising these individuals up to become ideals themselves, but instead couching their heroism in words and “noble vertues.” The two Leys and Isocrates stand as examples of what
ideas and free liberty can create, if applied appropriately, and as such are worthy of praise. This shapes Milton’s audience, and will inspire others to follow this model and use poetry to present political and social arguments in the eighteenth century. Milton will return continuously to his ideas on liberty, further refining them as time goes on. This early mention of the concept is notable for its connection with just government and civic duty. Both traits are based clearly in the values held by those in power and provide a foundation for the spread of liberty throughout England.

While young Milton seems certain that the service of the public is heroic, he is less sure of the specific role of the poet and scholar in public discourse. These competing roles, best understood as “seer” and “sage,” demonstrate that poets were conscious of their role in public discourse.14 “Seers” or “poet-prophets,” poets are responsible for following “the poet’s extraordinary vision [that] enabled him to discern spiritual laws and universal truth” (Rubin 20). This role, later embodied by the British Romantic poets, required lives of solitude that allowed poets to “apprehend messages hidden from plain view” (Rubin 19). However, and often opposingly, poets were also responsible for sharing the wisdom attained and helping the public mark occasions of note in public orations and celebrations. “In their capacity as transmitter of the moral laws embedded in the natural world, poets established a vital, active correspondence between themselves and their readers” (Rubin 22). This dichotomy, at its core, rests on the tension between the quiet life of contemplation and the public life of political activity, which Milton originates through his artistic and political pursuits. Milton, while completely in support

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14 These categories are taken from Joan Shelley Rubin’s characterization of Emersonian poets in nineteenth-century America. Rubin argues that the careers of nineteenth century American poets were governed by the continuous tension between lives of seclusion and their debt to their readers and publics. While Rubin uses David Shields to trace the birth of this tension as far back as 1720s London (22), I argue that we can see the roots of this within the figure of Milton and the competing dynamics of his engagement with the public which shape his entire career, and particularly in his roles as poet and politician.
of the spread of liberty and the enlightenment of his fellow man, was equally drawn to his studies and the quiet realm of ideas from which his compositions came.

Milton’s attention to this same dichotomy between the private and public role of poets is perhaps never more evident than in the twin pastoral poems composed in his late years at Cambridge, *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. In the poems, the young Milton, approaching his own entry into the public world after university, contemplates the better approach to life, the life of Mirth (*L’Allegro*) or the life of the solitary thoughtful man (*Il Penseroso*). Through a combination of pastoral imagery and classical allusion, Milton uses each poem to portray one approach and contemplate the relative advantages of each. In *L’Allegro*, Milton invokes Mirth and Liberty, allegorical figures hailing from on high to guide his verse and inform his art:

Com, and trip it as you go
On the light fantastic toe,
And in thy right hand lead with thee,
The Mountain Nymph, sweet Liberty;
And if I give thee honour due,
Mirth, admit me of thy crue,
To live with her and live with thee
In unreproved pleasures free (33-40)

These lines, invoking the “crue” that will travel throughout the romantic night of mirth and frivolity, show Milton’s consciousness of public life. These light musical lines establish a romantic and fanciful landscape through which the poet guides the audience. Unlike other poems where Milton endorses the temperate and reasoned exercise of liberty, *L’Allegro* shows him turning his attention towards a more free exercise of such passions.
The bulk of the poem uses the conventions of the pastoral genre, particularly its comparisons between rural and urban life, to depict the public life of mirth that calls many men. As the pastoral imagery of nymphs and shepherds rises, the poet first depicts “up-land Hamlets” (92) wherein the beauty of rural life is depicted as that of public celebration:

When the merry bell rings round.
And the jocund rebecks sound
To many a youth, and many a maid,
Dancing in the Chequer’d shade;
And young and old come forth to play
On a Sunshine Holyday, (93-98)

The public occasion, being an unspecified “holyday” calls not only to the youth but to the poet, who marks the lines with the instruments and joyous noise of the day. The language of the passage, again marked by its lightness and lyrical quality, celebrates the value of such gatherings, particularly in their unfettered enjoyment of life. In contrast, but still of mirth, Milton offers the competing image of the public life in town, which calls on its participants to use wit and arts to gain renown:

Towred Cities please us then,
And the busie hum of men,
Where throngs of Knights and Barons bold,
In weeds of Peace high triumphs hold,
With stores of Ladies, whose bright eies
Rain influence and judge the prise
Of Wit, or Arms, while both contend
To win her Grade, whom all commend. (117-124)

The two scenes are united by the presence of the public, and the ways in which each member participates in the larger festivities. In the town, Milton denotes the courtly realm where chivalry and contests of wit must prove a man’s worth both generally and to the opposite sex. In this arena, wherein the governing class meets to discuss the fate of all, the use of “wit,” decides not only the fate of nations, but also the affection of ladies. In these competing descriptions, Milton depicts the public life of poets (or intelligent men more broadly) and the imagery aligns neatly with Rubin’s sage: men of Mirth are not free of care or responsibility, but instead must ply their knowledge towards the public on occasions of note and also in the exercise of reason.

By contrast, *Il Penseroso* offers the depiction of allegorical Melancholy, described as both “saintly” (13) and a “pensive Nun” (31), and also as having been born of Vesta, the Roman Goddess of hearth and home (23). While the language of the poem is darker and heavier than that of *L’Allegro*, Milton makes it clear that this is not a lesser quality, but only a functioning of Melancholy’s brilliant nature: “Whose Saintly visage is too bright / To hit the sense of Human Sight; / And therefore to our weaker view, / Ore laid with black staid Wisdoms hue” (13-17). Milton, through the allegorical figure, acknowledges that though Melancholy appears darker, there is true value there. This description goes on to demonstrate Melancholy’s attunement to the natural world and wisdom, demonstrating the link between the private solitary life and higher thinking. As Roy Flannagan explains in his annotation, the poem is marked by allusions to “the music of the spheres” (72) with the imagery and allusions shifting between figures associated with heavenly bodies including Jove, Diana, and Ursa Major. Under the guidance of the spheres, the thoughtful man spends his night experiencing “what Worlds, or what vast Regions hold / The immortal mind that hath forsook / Her mansion in this fleshly nook” (89-91). The allusion, to
Plato’s model of the human soul, notes that through thought and study the “immortal mind” or soul can angle back towards its innate heavenly nature that it will return to after death. As such, the thoughtful mind is also able to gain further enlightenment from the natural world: “Of Forests, and enchantments drear, / Where more is meant then meets the ear” (119-120). The place of the poet’s mind reaches its apotheosis in the final lines, as the poet devotes himself to continued study and to the wisdom that Melancholy imparts:

And bring all Heaven before mine eyes.
And may at last my weary age
Find out the peaceful hermitage,
The hairy gown and mossy cell,
Where I may sit and rightly spell,
Of every star that Heaven doth shew,
And every herb that sips the dew;
Till old experience do attain
To something like prophetic strain.
These pleasures, Melancholy, give
And I with thee will choose to live. (166-176)

As many have read these lines, Milton seems to be devoting himself to the quiet life of study through which great knowledge is obtained. The language of isolation is clearly seen in “hermitage” and “cell,” while “spell” and “prophetic strain” note the higher knowledge that Milton hopes will follow from such study and devotion.

While many critics have tried to decipher how these poems represent Milton’s identity or sense of purpose, almost all agree that he doesn’t endorse one over the other (just as the text of
each poem rejects the values of its twin). In his contemplation of both quiet solitude and the life of the public figure, he finds value in each and seems to appreciate the role each has within the world. While the solitude of Il Penseroso is the only way to attain higher enlightenment, the world of L’Allegro still requires wit and intelligence to govern and guide the public towards liberty. For this reason, Milton viewed himself as having clear responsibilities in each, and embraced these competing roles by his work in both poetry and politics over the course of his lifetime. The line between these two disciplines was not as stable in Milton’s period and, though Armstrong and Tennenhouse see these as competing values, Milton works at times simultaneously and at times alternatingly to fulfill the role of both seer and sage. Using his intelligence and learning to inspire his own art and also working publicly to improve the conditions of others align with the functions of seer and sage and are a fitting application of the dual vision that informs much of Milton’s work. Later poets looking to Milton to sense their role in public discourse are informed by these dynamics as they work to pursue their own art and contribute meaningfully.

As Milton worked to articulate his own relationship with the public, that public was also undergoing radical transformations that would shape politics and discourse over the century that follows. As the English Civil War brought to light major tensions between religious and political structures, Milton’s lifetime saw the explosive growth of publishing that enabled a greater level of participation to a wider array of citizens than had ever previously had a stake in public discourse. Historian Michael Braddick notes that the volume of pamphlets printed on the subject of the civil war, as reflected in the holdings of obsessive collector George Thomason, amounts to well over 20,000 tracts by 1660 (xxii–xxiii). The library of tracts, many written by Milton and his immediate peers, demonstrates the emergence of a new public sphere that, as Habermas argues,
would dominate political relations for the next 150 years. Milton’s work, and particularly the vision of liberty that it presents, demonstrates an awareness of these changing dynamics and a sustained commitment to the maintenance of a free public discourse through which individuated minds can create, consider, and critique matters of art and politics.

The Areopagitica, first published in 1644, demonstrates how Milton uses his dual vision to intervene in a matter of public policy and effectively argue for the maintenance of free public discourse. The work, often mischaracterized as a defense for the freedom of the press, is best understood as an argument against censorship. Specifically, Milton argues for “For the Liberty of unlicenc’d Printing,” in response to the June 1643 act of Parliament that required licenses for all printed materials. While Milton agreed that libelous or otherwise inflammatory texts found to be dangerous should be removed from circulation, Areopagitica argues that pre-publication censorship is unnecessary as there already exist mechanisms within public discourse to self-censor. For this reason, Milton writes, “We should be wary therefore what persecution we raise against the living labours of publick men, how we spill the season’d life of man preserv’d and stor’d up in Books” (999). Books, as the expression of public discourse, must not be wasted. Essentially arguing for Parliament to trust the intellectual abilities of the public, Milton, in writing the unlicensed tract, committed an illegal act in order to retain the ability of himself and future writers to debate public discourse freely within the bounds of civil discourse. While historians don’t believe that the tract achieved any great immediate effect, Milton’s argument was appropriated in other tracts against licensing towards the end of the seventeenth century, and

\[15\] Habermas famously identifies the rise of the coffeehouse and its golden age (1680-1730) as the emergence of the public sphere (32-33). I am here arguing that Milton’s work demonstrates an earlier emergence, or at least foundational moments in the structural transformation.
is credited with influencing the Constitution of the United States and other nations that preserve the freedom of the press for their citizens (Flannagan 992).

*Areopagitica* demonstrates Milton’s dual vision, as it uses the authority provided by classical learning to intervene directly into contemporary politics for the improvement of British citizens. The title, taken from a famous oration by Isocrates, invokes an Athenian assembly made up of learned citizens that shaped education and behavior throughout the city. In invoking the assembly, Milton establishes himself as such a learned citizen who, while remaining anonymous, is using references such as this to establish his own intellectual acuity and authorize his argument. As Flannagan notes, the title may also purposefully invoke Ares, the god of war to position Milton as “a warfaring Christian” in the text (987). The court returns to the text as Milton uses classical precedent to argue for the unjust nature of Parliament’s severe censorship: “In *Athens* where Books and Wits were ever busier then in any other part of Greece, I finde but only two sorts of writings which the Magistrate car’d to take notice of; those either blasphemous and Atheisticall, or Libellous” (999). By eliciting the comparison, Milton is arguing the draconian nature of the censorship and the lack of trust it implies between Parliament and the public. He extends this argument by chronicling further examples from classical and Biblical traditions that demonstrate the ability of publics to self-censor, and the ability of societies to function fully when only the most extreme texts are banished or burned. The reason for this, Milton argues, is the innate ability of individuals, and publics by extension, to discern true discourse. Citing an epistle from Jerome, Milton writes “Read any books whatever come to thy hands, for thou art sufficient to judge aright and examine each matter” (1005). Demonstrating an aesthetic that will find full fruition in *Paradise Lost*, Milton uses a combination of classical and Biblical allusions to position himself rhetorically as the inheritor of the best practices of both.
As he extends the argument, Milton moves from the classical world and expounds variously on the nature of England and the liberty with which it must necessarily function. In these moments, Milton presents himself as being a spokesman of the “common people,” those who, while perhaps unable to participate in public discourse, need such discourse to grow further: “Nor is it to the common people lesse then a reproach; for if we be so jealous over them, as that we dare not trust them with an English pamphlet, what doe we but censure them for a giddy, vitious, and ungrounded people; in such a sick and weak estate of faith and discretion, as to be able to take nothing down but through the pipe of a licencer” (1020). As Milton here moves to what is at stake if censorship is maintained, he invokes the specter of a people ruled through censorship, projecting that they will become “giddy, vitious, and ungrounded.” In showing his concerns have practical results, Milton is demonstrating a commitment beyond his own work and art and more for the nation. Later in the tract, he invokes the nation more directly to describe the glory that yet might be attained:

it betok'ns us not degenerated, nor drooping to a fatall decay, but casting off the old and wrincl'd skin of corruption to outlive these pangs and wax young again, entring the glorious waies of Truth and prosperous vertue destin'd to become great and honourable in these latter ages. Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant Nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks: Methinks I see her as an Eagle muing her mighty youth, and kindling her undazl'd eyes at the full midday beam; purging and unscaling her long abused sight at the fountain it self of heav'nly radiance; while the whole noise of timorous and flocking birds, with those also that love the twilight, flutter
about, amaz'd at what she means, and in their envious gable would prognosticat a year of sects and schism (1020).

Projecting forward to an England returned to “the glorious ways of Truth,” Milton fulfills the dual vision and proceeds to describe the glory that awaits a nation governed by liberty. The nation is then presented first as Sampson and then as an Eagle that rises above the “timorous and flocking birds.” The comparison is both historical and contemporary, as he asserts the end of licensing is necessary to ensure England’s survival in the increasing competition with other European powers.\textsuperscript{16} As in Sonnet XII, Milton again imagines discourse not enlightened by truth as the noise of animals, in this case birds, that are unable to discern the light of truth. The passage then works to tie the fate of the individual citizens and the nation by extension to the case of liberty.

Finally, as Milton moves on to his more direct call for the repeal of the licensing act, he focuses the argument fully on liberty, and argues for the centrality of free public discourse to its functioning. Having demonstrated his concern for the public at large, he appeals to the Lords and Commons directly:

If it be desir’d to know the immediat cause of all this free writing and free speaking, there cannot be assign’d a truer then your own mild, and free, and human government; it is the liberty, Lords and Commons, which your own valorous and happy counsels have purchast us, liberty which is the nurse of all great wits; this is that which hath rarify’d and enlighten’d our spirits like the influence of heav’n; this is that which hath enfranchis’d, enlarg’d and lifted up our

\textsuperscript{16} Elsewhere in the tract, Milton uses his own experience visiting Galileo to demonstrate his (now wasted) pride that the penalties the astronomer faced could not be visited on a man in England.
apprehensions degrees above themselves. Ye cannot make us now lesse capable, lesse knowing, lesse eagerly pursuing of the truth, unlesse ye first make your selves, that made us so, lesse the lovers, lesse the founders of our true liberty (1020).

The passage ties rhetoric to the work of Parliament and the very foundation of the government and the people it governs. Here again we see how the poetics of liberty allow Milton to intervene on behalf of the English people for the preservation of public discourse. By tying liberty to “the influence of heaven” and the “happy counsels” of Parliament themselves, Milton argues that the licensing pact impedes the forward progress of liberty, representing a step backward in the policies of a country that had long valued liberty. Milton is also positioning a healthy public discourse at the forefront of liberty, crediting it as “the nurse of all great wits,” and (by implication) the pursuit of truth. The move distinguishes the English people as exceptional, as Parliament has inspired such a zeal for truth within them, and that zeal must be maintained.

In its ability to create a specific function of discourse within the processes of politics and liberty, Areopagitica does much to authorize the political participation of poets and intellectuals throughout the nation. Its timing, at the emergence of the middle class and the opening of a wider (though to be clear, not universal) public sphere shows the ethos of the thinking class in England in the period of the civil war. While Paradise Lost would attain greater popularity and renown, the legacy of Areopagitica is no less significant. While the two texts share a similar theme, the intervening years, and the specific events that influence Milton separate the two considerably. Yet there is a shared aesthetic that authorizes each text and fits each to its contemporary moment and the decades that follow. If Areopagitica is an argument for public discourse’s role in shaping the wits and informing the public, then Paradise Lost is the enactment of such discourse.
With its commitment to liberty and the manner in which it attempts to inform its readership, *Paradise Lost* represents an extension of Milton's ideology, and a commitment to his public.\(^{17}\) The poem shows Milton working to be both seer and sage, reaching truths through art, but using that art to inform his readership and “justify the ways of God to man.” Yet, despite its loftier and more artistic goals, the poem remains chiefly concerned with the functioning of liberty at large and of the role of discourse particularly. The first three books of *Paradise Lost*, as they establish the dramatic situation of the poem, present a case study on the nature of public discourse, its perverted and proper exercise, and the principles that should inform participation in it. In order to accomplish this, Milton uses the tools of his dual vision to offer commentary on contemporary politics and future reforms through the systems of meaning a lifetime of study in classical literature and cultures had provided him, revaluing the generic conventions of antiquity and arraying them in support of more modern perspectives (specifically, liberty and the individuated self). The resulting poem resounds with aesthetic beauty and poetic imagination while also staking out a clear position in contemporary debates on politics, religion, and subjectivity. By placing these scenes at the opening of the poem, Milton frames the work that follows in specific terms, emphasizing the centrality of the individual and free will within the entirety of human experience, and particularly within public discourse.\(^{18}\) Finally, by participating in the poem himself (as narrator), Milton directly demonstrates the effect poetic expression can have in matters of public concern and further hones his poetics of liberty and individual freedom.

Milton begins Book II with the description of the council in hell, a council which, because of the fallen nature of its participants, is marked by its use of false rhetoric, incomplete truth, and an overemphasis on signs, rather than individual liberty. The chapter begins with a

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\(^{17}\) All quotations given from *Paradise Lost* are taken from *the Riverside Milton*, edited by Roy Flannagan.

\(^{18}\) This shares much with the Habermasian model of the print public sphere.
description of Satan, now enthroned in Pandemonium (itself symbolic of the nature of false
discourse), which is rich in the language of idolatry, politics, and commerce:

High on the throne of Royal State, which far
Outshon the wealth of *Ormus* and of *Ind*,
Or where the gorgeous East with richest hand
Showrs on her Kings *Barbaric* Pearl and Gold,
Satan exalted by merits rais’d
To that bad eminence; and from despair
Thus high uplifted beyond hope, aspires
Beyond thus high, insatiate to pursue
Vain Warr with Heav’n and by success untaught
His proud imaginations thus displaid. (II.1-11)

The language of the passage reflects the grossly opulent nature of Satan as he presides over the
leaders of his demon army, preparing to scheme for their retaliation after their fall. The
description of his council is one based on images and rhetoric, highlighting the disconnect
between illusions and truth. Every description of Satan is undercut with a reminder of his false
and evil nature. Though he is “exalted by merits” it is only to “bad eminence,” and while he is
enthroned in “Royal State,” the richness of the throne is equated to barbarism and the wealth “of
Ormus and of Ind,” where democracy is opposed by Kings and tyrants. In the context of post-
Civil War England, Milton is linking royal monarchical power with not only greed, but false
rhetoric that works only to control those who consume it. Satan, as is to be expected, is identified
with the sins of pride and vanity. Thus the council that follows is underwritten by these sinful
and selfish motives instead of truth.
Milton further enriches the foundation of the false rhetoric with language chosen deliberately to evoke the trappings of church and state that, to Milton, define false rhetoric, and prevent individuals from attaining truth. In anticipation of the council, the gathering is described at the end of Book I alternatively as “that infernal Court” (792), and “Secret conclave” (795), demonstrating Milton’s views on monarchy and Catholicism respectively. Seventeenth-century readers would have no difficulty connecting these sources of authority with the fallen rhetoric of the demons. As the council continues, Belial will reject the punishment as the Father’s “Call…to Penance” (II.92), and will insist that the only correct course of action is to wage war anew with greater engines of destruction and armies bathed in hellfire. Giving such dark motives and tactics to the demons demonstrates their fall from glory and the undue faith they have in violence and wealth. The demons that utilize this rhetoric, Moloch, Belial, Beezlebub and Mammon, are a cross-section of mythic and Biblical figures from many cultures, which argues that past cultures, as opposed to being wrong simply lacked complete understanding. The sinfulness of the demons’ positions resonates directly with the forms of authority that, in this later stage of Milton’s life, have waned in import and demonstrated their tendencies to lead individuals away from truth and temperance.

The language of the council, in typical Miltonic fashion, is crafted in its scansion and phonetics to reinforce the messages spoken by the demons. Moloch, in presenting his case to return to open war, is defined through serpentine hissing language: “Moloch, Scepter’d King / Stood Up, the strongest and fiercest Spirit / That fought in Heav’n; now fiercer by despair” (II.43-5). His rhetoric of violence and war is underscored by continued use of strong consonant sounds and heavily accented lines that break the iambic foot with greater force: “Choose / Arm’d with Hell flames and fury all at once / O’re Heav’n’s high towrs to force resistless way, / Turning
our Tortures into horrid arms” (II.59-62). Whether the audience is completely conscious of the poetic construction or not, the resulting effect is a theme and message that are given added weight by their form. By drawing together his art with his politics, Milton synergistically heightens the effect of the message encoded. His art raises the level of his political discourse just as the political message enriches the artistry of the verse.

Finally the incomplete nature of the views expressed in the council in hell is expressed not just by the crafting of the scene, but the ways in which it appropriates and recasts conventions from traditional epics. Council scenes are most prevalent in epics of war, such as Homer’s Iliad and Virgil’s Aeneid, wherein, in addition to extreme physical heroism, the heroes of antiquity display their respective abilities in logic and rationality by either succeeding or failing in the political arena of the democratic council. Notably, Achilles demonstrates his heroism (eventually) through a council scene wherein he indulges the supplicant Priam and returns the body of Hector. Conversely, Virgil’s Aeneas demonstrates his barbarism and ultimate lack of heroism by slaying the suppliant Turnus in the closing lines of The Aeneid. Milton then, is drawing on this tradition of epic heroes as he characterizes Satan and his demons, themselves “demy-gods on golden seats” (I.796) to demonstrate the limits of classical culture. By placing characters from his modern Christian worldview into a scene from classical epic, Milton invites comparison to the figures of the classical age, and demonstrates that, due to their sinful and violent motivations, the demons represent an antiquated worldview. Motivated by pride, vengeance and physical domination, they fail to grasp that the nature of heroism (to Milton) relies on humility, mercy, and selflessness. Milton has effectively shifted the matrix of heroism from external greatness to success in the internalized conflict of morality and truth. Satan epitomizes the classical hero in a modern world who remains incapable of sensing the actual
stakes of the conflict at hand. Milton demonstrates this failure of recognition through the clear juxtaposition of this initial council scene with one based in the truth and light of Heaven.

After the narrator transitions his own sensibilities from the descriptions of hell into the light of heaven, the poet relates a similarly composed council scene that is enriched with proper signs of goodness and truth. By presenting a council scene in heaven, and one participated in by the Father and Son at that, Milton demonstrates that the logic and reason of the classical world are still just, when stripped of the barbarism and brutality that traditionally accompanied them. While the Father is enthroned in heaven, his power is not absolute or tyrannical, but instead defers to the free will that he has given each of his creations. While he is omniscient and powerful, he respects the self-determination of all of his creations, even when it becomes perverted, as it has in Satan:

Such I created all th’Ethereal Powers
And Spirits, both them who stood and them who failed;
Freely they stood who stood and fell who fell.
Not free, what proof could they have giv’n sincere
Of true allegiance, constant Faith or Love, (III.100-3)

To the Father, Milton gives a lighter and airy tone, lacking any severity, or at worst embodying disappointment. The theology presented by the Father directly equates to Milton’s own faith and understanding of the power that logic and self-determination have in the world. The Father continues his discussion with the arrayed powers of heaven by explaining the heart of his beliefs, expounding that each creation has been given “Will and Reason (Reason also is Choice)”

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19 Milton repeats this point in Book V, when the War in heaven is presented in terms bordering on mock epic, emptying such conflicts of meaning in light of the conflict over morality.
through which to seek their own freedom (III.108-9), and, in the absence of any form of predestination, each creation must use its reason to set its own purpose, as the Father pronounces: “I form’d them free, and free they must remain” (III.124). The council will continue by the Son and Father situating the present events into the totality of Christian history and knowledge. The power of the divine is always balanced with that of free will: the divine have the power to anticipate what is to come and work their will, but not to impede the individual’s self-determination.

By placing his beliefs in the particularly well-crafted words of the divine, Milton leaves no uncertainty in his audience as to which view they should subscribe. The juxtaposition dramatizes this in every dimension—content, tone, and sound. Milton has emptied the classical scene of its primal violence and placed “Will and Reason” at its center, dictating to his audience that authentic and productive public discourse is possible in the fallen world, but demands that its participants actively escape the “natural slavery,” that the adherence to false signs dictates. The iconoclasm that Milton argues for and inspired within his contemporaries and successors demands that participants shirk off the “cloggs” of external motivations and choose to follow the innate path of liberty. This is a message crafted carefully through political, artistic, and philosophical expression meant to create an audience capable of enlightened discourse.

*Paradise Lost* also marks a significant turning point in the epic tradition that further exemplifies Milton’s commitment to creating individuated subjects within systems of political and economic authority. Prior to Milton, no epic poem had featured active narration that mediated the events of the poem, but more importantly also had a significant personal stake in the events of the poem. The narrator is at once composer/creator, but also a fallen human in his own right. Significantly, the narrator is created in the image of Milton, endowed with Milton’s
public identity (and the failures associated thereto). As Francis Blessington notes, the narrator operates across three specific dynamics: “He reveals the interest of his age in the Divine Poetry Movement,” “[He] is the inheritor of literary traditions,” and he stands as “The disillusioned revolutionary” (98). Within the poem, Milton places the individual at the center of the moral conflict that defines the universe, and he offers himself as just such an individual. A further amplification of the individuated self seen in Satan and Adam, the narrator only eclipses the others in his ability to link the poem to the contemporary moment. He, realized in three-dimensions, is a flawed human attempting to participate in politics via a new avenue of change. He is at once a religious, literary, and political individual who can write with authority about all of these issues. In an age where discourse increasingly moved through the proliferation of books and pamphlets, Milton emerges within and outside the poem as an individual with vested interest in contemporary debates over “morality, freedom, education and political power” (Blessington, 98). He has crafted a poetics of liberty and freedom that will inspire generations of poets philosophically and as a model for reasoned and logical participation in public discourse—continuing to fight the ideological battles of the civil war in the lines of poetry.

As I’ve demonstrated, Milton was highly influential in establishing and maintaining a rhetorical position for poetry in the public discourse of his period. While his personal politics damaged his public reputation in the years following the Restoration, the figure of Milton looms large throughout English literature and poetry across the eighteenth century (and beyond). As Britain continued its expansion throughout the Atlantic world, Milton, the politician and poet, was carried with the British people and became highly influential for American poets and politicians. Armstrong and Tennenhouse argue that it was Milton’s particular intellect and its ability to transcend disciplines that gave his legacy its power in the Atlantic world: “The
Renaissance Milton’s body of knowledge is larger than that of his readers because it encompasses the coherent body of theology, politics, and science made available through humanist training; and the modern Milton’s is superior insofar as it has been transformed into poetry capable of transcending history” (32). The fusion of knowledge and art creates a figure that, as Armstrong and Tennenhouse argue, begins to transcend the actual figure of Milton and become something more akin to our modern author: sharing qualities with the man, but also embodying near-heroic qualities beyond him.

Additionally, Milton inspired a generation of poets to similarly apply their own learning and intellect to the task of public improvement. Milton, his contemporaries, and those he inspired found ways to inform and shape a public towards the lessons of Renaissance humanism. This wider effort, which becomes a trend throughout the poetry of the Atlantic world, is described by Armstrong and Tennenhouse as an “unwitting conspiracy”:

[Milton] belonged to a large and variegated group of professionals and divines: medical men and scientists who were redefining the biological body and how to extend its life; philosophers and political theorists who were revising the idea of the nation and how to manage it; entrepreneurs and colonizers who were revising the idea of labor and how to maximize it, and still others—writers and publishers—who were retailoring Renaissance materials in order to reach a Restoration audience and readership. Their combined efforts can be viewed in retrospect as an unwitting conspiracy. Together these people rewrote the old language of power that authorized monarchy. They made a language that individuated the subject and situated his body within the state and yet enclosed his mind in a personal world which limited the powers of state. As they positioned it
outside and indeed above political power, they gave the mind a power of its own.

(42-43)

That is, Milton stands as a singular intellect arising at a particularly fortuitous moment in which the shifting dynamics of power and subjectivity inspired his readers to be refashioning themselves as minds within the apparatus of state. Through this work, the readers redefine the functioning of power and create a new discourse through which that power is refined. Beyond contributing to broader political processes, this work also gave Milton’s specific aesthetic (and its political dynamics) particular purchase within literature and the range of poets who sought to enter public discourse. I will trace this influence in the chapters that follow.

However, while Milton has a rich legacy throughout English literature broadly, the legacy of Milton’s poetry and prose tracts have a particularly strong influence in America. This legacy, first traced in great detail in George Sensabaugh’s Milton in Early America, shows that beyond outselling both Virgil and Homer in the colonies (3-4), Milton’s aesthetic (and its dual vision) shaped public discourse in matters of taste and politics: “As Americans shaped their discourse according to neoclassic principles of taste, they answered warmly to the high rhetoric of Areopagitica and the grand style of Paradise Lost. As they embraced current ideals of the enlightenment, they instinctively read their experience in terms of Reformation theology and Renaissance views” (5). As this description and the array of primary texts Sensabaugh presents demonstrate, those in America were not confused by any separation of Milton’s politics and poetry. Instead, they saw how his work in each domain informed the other and represented a singular vision: “As a poet, Milton ranged in divine realms, revealing to the imagination scenes unperceived by uninspired mortals. As a polemicist, he turned to affairs of Church and State, solving through his acute powers of reason issues that American Revolution, demonstrated the
role of the poet in public discourse. Beyond the revolution, Milton’s poetry and prose, well read by the framers of the constitution, would influence the defining moment of American political thought, and help focus its politics around the values of liberty and the individuated self.

As the newspapers and pamphlets produced throughout the Atlantic world demonstrate, Milton, in hewing to a specific cultural position for poetry in public discourse, and by displaying a particular aesthetic, was a model for generations of poets that followed. The English populace, granted new power in the Restoration age, found themselves drawn to increasingly public discussions of politics, economics, religion, and aesthetics. Across these discussions, Milton had ignited a dialectic focused on the proper functioning of liberty that shaped the articulation of specific views and also ensured a readership for such expressions. In the chapters that follow, as I trace the role of the poetics of liberty in debates over commerce, native populations, slavery, and other important matters of public discourse, Milton’s legacy becomes apparent in specific images or rhetorical gestures, but also in the broad engagement these poets have to the public, acting in isolation or in public to continually widen the engagement of the burgeoning middle class. While these trends are part of larger cultural movements, tracing each backwards always returns analysis to the figure of Milton and the model he provides.
Chapter Two: Imperial Entanglements: Patriotism, Mercantilism, and Heroic Commerce in Pastoral and Georgic Poetry of the Atlantic

As England’s citizens, institutions, and corporations stretched out into the Atlantic world, using the opening decades of the eighteenth century to expand the empire’s trade, influence, and control throughout the region, citizens of both the metropole and the colonies were confronted with new peoples, cultures, and values that forced them to reevaluate their own practices, and reconcile those practices with global systems of empire. Indeed, as Britons took further steps away from the metropole, and encountered more territories and peoples, public discourse worked actively to incorporate each shift (minute and grand) in perception, conceptualization, and valuation into the English worldview. Chief among these new influences was the increasing role that trade, commerce, and mercantilism played in the fueling of empire. These processes, at once separate from (occurring distantly, and mostly to “others”) and inherent in (affecting household purchases and activities) the everyday lives of citizens, are reflected throughout the poetry of the age. Just as politicians, scientists, and philosophers expanded their own heuristics and ontologies to incorporate new ideas and shifts in values, so too were poets left to adapt and redefine the tools of their inquiry to better represent their nation. Just as Milton argued about the nature of British political discourse through a neoclassical epic, so too did other poets turn to the genres of antiquity, in many cases, the georgic and pastoral, in order to, through generic imitation and variation, encapsulate their views on the imperial project and the political, economic, and social trends that it created.

In 1757, John Dyer, a welsh poet and preacher published a four book poem devoted to the practice of raising sheep and participation in the wool trade. *The Fleece: A Poem in Four Books* fits among a group of poems David Shields categorizes as “staples,” wherein a poet turns his
concern to the products of empire and how they fuel the expansion of empire and inspire reflection on the part of the people (Shields 64). Such poems, which exist within body of poetry inflected with the language and values of commerce, adapt classical genres that connect poets working in the Atlantic to the cultural inheritance not only of Milton (who worked in the genres prior to *Paradise Lost*), but also to Virgil, and the rural poetry he produced in his early career. The opening of Dyer’s georgic poem demonstrates the way such poems merge classical forms and imperial politics in order to establish the importance of the staple commodity,

The care of sheep, the labors of Loom,
And arts of Trade, I sing. Ye rural nymphs,
Ye swains and princely merchants, aid the verse.
And ye, high-trusted guardians of our isle,
Whom public voice approves, or lot of birth
To the great charge assigns: ye good, of all
Degrees, all sects, be present to my song.
So may distress, and wretchedness, and want,
The wide felicities of labor learn:
So may the proud attempts of Gaul
From our strong borders, like a broken wave,
In empty foam retire. But chiefly thou,
The people’s shepherd, eminently plac’d
Over the num’rous swains of every vale,
With well-ermitted pow’r and watchful eye,

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20 Other such poems Shields identifies are devoted to tobacco, indigo, and sugar.
On each gay field to shed beneficence,

Celestial Office! Thou protect the song. (I.1-17)

This invocation demonstrates the ways in which, as Shields describes, the poem is “illustrating the imposition of economic significance on the traditional pastoral circumstances of poetry” (64). In light of empire, the work of agriculture needs to be considered in the full context of the systems of commerce it now fuels, literally and metaphorically. Dyer’s opening invocation places equal emphasis on shepherds, labor, and trade, suggesting a mutual reliance between the three which is underscored when he repeats the call with the triple invocation that follows next: “Ye rural nymphs, / Ye swains and princely merchants, aid the verse” (I.2-3). Here, the traditional rural landscape of Hesiod and Virgil is framed within not just the work of the field, but also the work of commerce. Beyond this, Dyer uses two distinct phrases to invoke the spirit of Milton’s poetry. The reference above to nymphs, swains, and princely merchants echoes themes that Milton uses in Lycidas, an elegy to a friend lost at sea which mixes maritime and pastoral imagery. Later in the passage, Dyer’s use of “But chiefly thou,” cements the connection by invoking the oft-repeated phrase from Milton’s invocation that opens Paradise Lost (I.17). In this way, Dyer places himself within a specific poetic tradition and uses the authority of that tradition to reinvent the conventions of pastoral poetry. The poem’s focus remains on the fields and farms, but Dyer views them through the town centers (if not the metropole) as well.

Beyond the inscription of the rural within the municipal, the dominant mode of the introduction also concerns itself far beyond the work of the shepherd to project its immediate work into a decidedly national framework. Within georgic, and its didactic agenda, Dyer sees not just a means of taming the rural land, but also a means of ensuring national dominance. In this way, Dyer argues directly for the work of his song advancing the imperial cause, as he shows
that it has grown beyond its traditional didactic role (again, as seen in Hesiod and Virgil) and must also explain how such labor must be interpreted in the imperial system. Dyer achieves this with the central gestures of the above quotation, wherein he first invokes the traditional purpose of his georgic: “So may distress, and wretchedness, and want, / The wide felicities of labor learn:” (I.8-9), and then expresses the shift in a comparison to France: “So may the proud attempts of Gaul / From our strong borders, like a broken wave, / In empty foam retire” (I.10-1).

The poet, using a key trope of the poetics of liberty (empire of the seas), links the work of the shepherd and trader directly to the dominance of Britain over its imperial competition. The effect of this gesture is to not only elevate the station of shepherd, weaver, and merchant, but also to demonstrate how all the industries of the isle are united within the imperial system. By placing this argument within the regulated lines of his georgic, Dyer is also including poets within the system; all of the elements are invoked in support of his song and through the metered foot of his poem they find regulation, organization, and coordination.

Later in the first book, Dyer expands further on the role of trade to hew a specific station for Britain within the emerging global economy of commerce as he turns his eye towards pastoral visions. In an address to the island itself, Dyer hails its landscapes and resources are an asset in the age of commerce:

Hail noble Albion! Where no golden mines,

No soft perfumes, nor oils, nor myrtle bow’rs,

The vig’rous frame and lofty heart of man

Enervate: round whole stern cerulean brows

White-winged snow, and cloud, and pearly rain,

Frequent attend, with solemn majesty. (I.153-8)
As the poet here turns to the description of climate, he bases the characterization in the negative, first expressing what the nation doesn’t have, a catalog that demonstrates an unmistakably global view. Similarly, it suggests a readership that holds not only awareness, but perhaps envy of the goods and materials that have, by 1757, long been found throughout the harbors, markets, and homes of the English people. The poet, acting to comfort the readership, expresses how whereas the sons of other nations are enervated by other climes, that of England has wrought sons of great intellectual virtue, or as Dyer argues, the climate treats its sons to “compress” and “twist their nerves,” and “Thus Form’d, our Edwards, Henrys, Churchills, Blakes, / Our Lockes, our Newtons, and our Miltons rose” (I.162-3). Besides the direct reference, the argument of the stanza also invokes the nature of Miltonic liberty with a play on temperance (and its etymological link to temperate and temperament). But the argument is clear; Britain, not being granted great wealth in raw physical material, is blessed with intellectual capital, through which it can operate and maintain a system for mutual benefit across the Atlantic and around the world.

Finally, Dyer’s poem continues by extending the description of the national landscape from the traditional purview and, through an abiding appreciation of trade, expresses the beauty of the new landscape of the land:

To these thy naval streams,
Thy frequent towns superb of busy trade,
And ports magnific add, and stately ships
Innumerous. But whither strays my muse?
Pleas’d like a traveler upon the strand
Arriv’d of bright Augusta: wild he roves
From deck to deck, thro’ groves immense of masts;
‘Mong crouds, bales, cars, the wealth of either Ind; (I.173-80)

Here, composed as an aside within describing how best to choose a breed of sheep to raise, Dyer demonstrates how the classical genre of georgic needs to be stretched and adapted to fit the new landscape of Britain. Turning his poetic eye to cataloguing the goods that flow through the town demonstrates a new aesthetic that imbues images of commerce with a beauty based in their representative dynamics instead of nature. Images such as “groves immense of masts” merge the traditional and the commercial to find beauty in the latter, and purpose in the former. Through the cultural purchase of his art and its generic positioning, Dyer forwards a specific vision of empire into the political discourse of his contemporaries.

Poetry produced in and around the Atlantic represents a specific segment of public discourse in which the policies of empire were celebrated, critiqued, and condemned through verse on both the local and global scale. Across the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the forces of commerce governed an increasingly large portion of the daily lives of imperial subjects and the colonists, indigenous peoples, and enslaved persons that were brought into the systems. Poets saw their craft as a means to influence public opinion and shape the empire as it continued its rapid expansion. As Suvir Kaul argues, these poets envisioned themselves not as a superfluous separate commentary on empire, but as a vital force in steering the energies of commerce and politics towards a more perfect form of government: “The history of English poetry in the long eighteenth century is best written as a history of poets’ attempts to endow the nation with literary, cultural, and iconic capital adequate to its burgeoning status as a global power” (18). The economic metaphor is particularly fitting, as in shaping the vocabulary through which visions of empire could be constructed, poets were tacitly endorsing the system, if only in their own preferred model. As arbiters and artists, poets found a means through which, in
the model of Milton, to use the tools of the poetics of liberty to create and influence empire in the popular imagination of the period.

It is precisely in this position and function that many of the poets of the early eighteenth century find themselves, attempting to secure a position within the functions of empire, both through their art and in the influence they have on the public. In England, Milton had effectively opened the door for such poetic intervention in matters of public discourse, but as his legacy entered a new century, it proved to be both empowering and limiting to the next generation of poets. As noted above, Dyer and others continue to be influenced by Milton’s style of authorizing contemporary perspectives through the use of classical and Biblical precedent; however, as the popularity of *Paradise Lost* continued to rise, many of the scholars and public figures of the age began to argue that the genre of epic had, essentially, been finished. While many lesser poets would attempt to create poems in the epic vein, few if any attempted to rise to the scope and import that Milton had obtained, and none were able to reach the audience that *Paradise Lost* continued to command throughout the Atlantic world. While it is too simplistic to say that epic ended with Milton, it is clear that the poets of the Atlantic World primarily sought other genres to empower their discourse on imperial practice, and here there was classical and contemporary precedence; both Milton and Virgil had built towards their epic poems through the creation of pastoral and georgic poetry.

The turn towards the pastoral and the georgic by poets of the Atlantic contains within it a curious tension with which all the poets must grapple: how do these traditional genres change when the landscape that inspires them transforms in the spaces of the Atlantic? It is the purpose of this chapter to examine how the transformation of these genres allows the poets of the transatlantic to produce, empower, and configure a set of tropes and images that will become the
discourse on imperial policies throughout the Atlantic world in the eighteenth century (the poetics of liberty). As shepherds became sailors, agriculture became commerce, and farmers became plantation owners, these traditional genres changed to encompass a vastly different landscape (often literally, as in the Dyer example), and the way in which many poets positioned themselves and their texts codified a vocabulary through which views on empire, commerce, and subjectivity would be expressed through the age of revolutions. This poetry then operates reciprocally with the evolving policies of mercantilism as it circulates throughout the Atlantic world alongside the goods and bodies that it attempts to conceptualize, both authorizing further expansion while also refining and limiting the control of the empire. While their depictions authorized and supported many imperial practices, the commercial markets in the colony and metropole created demand for their art, and though many poems would suffer in the market of public opinion, their continued circulation, while bolstered widely by the print public sphere (and the rise of the newspapers specifically) also opened them up to increased criticism and unfavorable comparisons to the work of their generic predecessors.

While often written off as the lesser works of both Virgil and Milton, their poems created in the pastoral and georgic genres demonstrate a particular kind of poetic expression that had both an occasional nature, and also the capacity for political commentary that made these genres well-suited to the task of establishing a common understanding of the imperial project, and then influencing views on it. Pastoral poetry, from its roots in the songs of Ancient Greek poets,

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21 As much as the poets of the Atlantic generally composed in the shadow of Milton, the figure of Virgil was also large in the mind of cultural critics and is a component of the critical neglect of these poems. As the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms entry for georgic demonstrates, “the most influential work was the *Georgics* (37–30 BCE) of the Roman poet Virgil, which includes advice on bee-keeping and vines. Several English poets in the eighteenth century produced banal georgics in imitation of Virgil, including John Dyer in *The Fleece* (1757) and James Grainger in *The Sugar-Cane* (1759).” Once again, I would suggest that modernist aesthetics, in deemphasizing the political context and function of the poem, have limited critical attention towards these two poems which are analyzed in this chapter.
focused primarily on how harmonious and idyllic the natural world was. Theocritus, the poet of *the bucolics*, depicted rural settings, shepherdesses, and nymphs. Later, in his eclogues, Virgil demonstrated that the genre itself was capable of more than idle meditations and could be used for political allegory, which he did through the comparison of urban and rural life. Conversely, georgic poetry concentrated on the work of farmers with a primarily didactic intention. Nature was less ideal, and instead represented a force that could be tamed through hard work. While perhaps differing most in tone and purpose, the two genres share one essential quality: a reliance on the natural world and the landscape to motivate and inspire all larger intentions. But what happens to the genres as the idle fields become endless ocean waves, or, as in Dyer, the grove of English trees is transformed into the masts of ships? Tropes and conventions of the genre need to be recast so that they can incorporate the new worldview of the nation. Just as philosophers, ethnographers, geographers, and natural scientists reconfigured their ontologies in light of imperial expansion, so too did poets shift their own craft to fit the new world. Understanding the shifts in these genres provides insight into how these poets inform contemporary understandings of the imperial project and how they characterize its policies.

The most common tactic found throughout the poetry from England, the Caribbean, and the American colonies to characterize the empire was to define and justify the British imperial project through contrast with the barbaric and exploitative practices of the empires of antiquity and contemporary Spain. Within the boundaries of this debate, the poetics of liberty were central to poetic discourse. The primary method of differentiation takes two different but related directions: the myth of the new Rome and the empire of the seas. Primarily through the espousing of liberty, Britain fashioned itself the rightful heir to the arts and learning of the classical world, which, having originated in ancient Greece and continued through ancient Rome,
was finally able to blossom in Britain. While this myth most often takes the form of the fulfillment of the values and virtues of antiquity in the civility of Britain, it also takes a more direct form in understanding England as the eventual settlement of the Trojan expatriates, providing a direct link to both Homer and Virgil. In the collection of metaphors and imagery that makes up the empire of the seas, Britain is seen as being a wholly different type of empire that yields its power of naval dominance to create a vast empire of commerce and trade that benefits all localities that it enfolds. The image of the British ship becomes central to understanding how the empire asserts its power and uses it to order and regulate the activity of many constituent political and social entities. In support of these values, poets around the Atlantic elevate the station of mariners, farmers, and merchants to express the workings of empire. However, what is most central to both of these dynamics is the idea of liberty and arts flourishing through the expansion and maintenance of the British Empire. These are sentiments that will deteriorate as the eighteenth century continues and the policies of empire are exposed as being exploitative. I would argue that liberty becomes such a flashpoint in the revolutionary conflicts at the end of the decade as a direct result of how prominently liberty figured in imperial discourse in this earlier period. The tropes of empire turn negative, but in these early decades, poets play a central and concrete role in the foundation of the authorizing myths. Their poems embody the dynamics of political discourse which is of central importance to the rise of the nation and new understandings of political subjectivity that dominate the latter half of the eighteenth century.

The poetry of the Atlantic world has historically received less than its due analysis because of competing anachronistic tendencies to view it as too occasional, or not of sufficient aesthetic quality, and/or as not occasional enough, or too far removed from the processes of empire and subjectivity that are writ large in narrative and historical texts that are central to
transatlantic studies. However, there have been two scholars whose examinations of poetry in the long eighteenth century have greatly informed this analysis. The first, Suvir Kaul, argues for the centrality of English verse in forming public sentiment towards the imperial project and giving the population a means through which to formulate and debate views on empire and later nation. As he argues in *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire*, “Poets in the long eighteenth century imagined poetry to be a unique and privileged literary form for the enunciation of a puissant (and plastic) vocabulary of nation, particularly one appropriate to a Britain proving itself (in fits and starts, to be sure) great at home and abroad” (5). This “vocabulary” that the poets develop consists of an array of tropes and myths that, not lacking in grandeur, demonstrate the right (if not responsibility) of Britain to extend its power and authority across vast spaces and into the lives of many different peoples. Kaul further argues that the poems he examines authorize the British through contrast with other powers: “I attend to poems that energize themselves via meditations on the history and prospects of the nation. They do so most often in a comparative mode, seeking solace and warning from nations and states in the past, and, more competitively, arguing Britain’s distinction from contemporary European powers” (18). My methodology shares this view on English verse and seeks to explore the comparisons it draws (and markedly does not draw) to classical and contemporary powers. However, I want to extend Kaul’s ideas and test them throughout the waters of the Atlantic. In the many localities of the British Empire, the underlying infrastructure of empire becomes much more complicated than the English poets’ project. That is, the version of empire emanating from the colonies, while echoing many of the shared values and myths, begins to take on a much different appearance, and adds complexity and texture to the political discourse over imperial policies. As Kaul notes, “The poets act locally—they take sides on topical matters, argue domestic agendas—but think globally” (18),
and for this reason, the transatlantic variations on the central themes Kaul identifies warrant further examination. Views on imperial matters are much differently shaped when held by the colonists who prop up the system, at least initially, and especially in the hands of those who themselves become commodities in the system.

Perhaps the most engaged scholar of the poetry of British North America, David Shields both complements and contradicts many of Kaul’s assertions. Always an advocate for the relevance of British American belles lettres, Shields, in *Oracles of Empire*, argues that the poetry of the colonies inscribes a fully realized political engagement with the imperial policies of England: “the debate over empire in British America was coherent from the Glorious Revolution until the adoption of William Pitt’s policy in the Seven Years’ War” (9). He concludes that British American poetry of affairs of state are best classified as working on three different “problems of empire”: “The promise of material wealth and cultural refinement extended by the imperial contract; the contest of provincial laws and liberties with metropolitan prerogatives; and the threat to provincial security posed by Spain, France and France’s Indian allies” (3). Using these three imperial problems as guide, Shields explores a range of forms and tropes that demonstrate the engagement of poets throughout North America with the policies of empire. While the first problem in the list may closely align with Kaul, the second and third are decidedly colonial in perspective. However, any picture of the role of poetry in Atlantic political discourse is incomplete without examining how the circulation of the poems allows these poets to engage in debate with the poets in England putting forth an idealized vision for empire. Poetry is not segmented as deliberately as Shields’s formulation might have us believe. In fact, while there is poetry deliberately and wholly focused on the affairs of state, the majority of poetry composed for nearly any occasion is set within the context of imperial policy and engages with it
to varying degrees. Though Shields focuses on poetry composed deliberately to enter the debate over these core conflicts, a vast array of poetry engages in this discourse at least tangentially while ostensibly focusing on other matters. Funeral elegies become meditations on the nature of citizenship and civic duty, morality poems express basic assumptions about the nature of liberty and freedom, and pastoral or georgic poems resonate differently given their imperial entanglements.

From both Kaul and Shields, there is a vocabulary of empire that makes up the poetics of liberty that was used in support of both the myth of the new Rome and the empire of the seas. The pervasiveness of their deployment warrants some additional explanation here. It is these images which dominate the poetry in support of the imperial project during the first half of the eighteenth century. Yet the degree to which arts, learning, and liberty are able to thrive in the mercantile policies of the empire is much less settled in the poetry of both metropole and colonies, and becomes more hotly contested as the century progresses. These poets enter into the specific political debates that surround imperial commerce, and reshape pastoral and georgic poetry in ways that set the terms of political debate for years to come.

The close readings that follow are meant once more to demonstrate not just the presence of the tropes of the poetics of liberty, but also to capture the ways in which understanding this form of poetic political discourse can help us see the period through its continuities instead of its rupture. Beyond the breaking of national frameworks, what follows deconstructs distinctions between occasional and high art poetry. This range of poems, some canonical, some archival, show how poets, whether in support or in questioning the policies of empire, engage in a

22 It would be wrong not to note that, according to Shields, these foundational myths are one and the same in North America: “British American poetry on the affairs of state featured from 1690 to 1750 a discourse of empire amalgamating the myths of Britain as the New Rome and the British empire as imperium pelagi…Poets argued that the British Empire’s warrant for dominion lay in its institution of British liberties in colonies around the world. The rule of British law stood guarantee on British contracts” (3)
discourse based on specific terms that they all negotiate. While any sampling of such works feels incomplete, these selections demonstrate the nature of the dialectic on liberty and the ways in which it circulated in the various forums of the Atlantic World. I begin with the work of Alexander Pope before exploring many lesser known poets, and finally close with another “staple poem,” James Grainger’s *The Sugar-Cane*.

Often viewed as the (lesser) literary successor of Milton and Dryden, Alexander Pope held a prominent place in English poetry at the onset of the eighteenth century. With Milton, Pope shared a deep commitment to the classical epic (his translations of Homer would remain bestsellers throughout the nineteenth century), and also a commitment to the politics of his period. Kaul traces a tradition of engagement directly from Milton through Pope, noting that there is an outward consciousness to many of the poets that have traditionally been viewed as primarily examining the inward self, and that Milton’s engagement with his own turbulent times is similar to Pope’s desire to oversee the republic of letters that emerged through print culture and the rise of the coffeehouses (9). Of note here is Pope’s position as one of the first poets to meld commerce and trade into natural beauty in such a way as to elevate the functions of empire. The poem, “Windsor-Forest,” represents, like Dyer’s *Fleece*, a merging of traditional pastoral with a metropolitan consciousness of the political and economic functions of empire. Thus, like many portions of *Paradise Lost*, the poem amalgamates the classical, the spiritual, and the political, but unlike Milton’s poem, Pope creates a poem of praise and a ringing endorsement of the imperial project.

“Windsor-Forest” makes use of a Miltonic style to praise the pastoral beauty of the forest, but also lays out a concrete image of the British Empire as unique in both history and the contemporary world (the “dual vision” of Milton). First published in 1713 on the occasion of the
signing of the Treaty of Utrecht, “Windsor-Forest” introduces many of the images that will become mainstays of the empire of the seas iconography. In the grandness of its style and direction, the poem also takes on a metropolitan air, demonstrating British supremacy over an array of regions and competing empires. Yet the central imagery of the poem is one of harmony and peace, as is customary to the genre. Significantly, this pastoral harmony is only found in the natural world insofar as it supports British commerce (a dynamic which the classical world would reject, to say nothing of the Romantics of the next century). Though Pope mixes genres and ideas, there is a harmony to the poem that is similar to the forest itself, as Pope’s vision of the British Empire is one that fits easily into many great traditions. The opening lines of the poem invoke muse, monarch and patron (George Granville, a well-known Royalist), before turning to the pastoral beauty of the forest:

The groves of Eden vanish’d now so long
Live in description, and look green in song:
These, were my breast inspir’d with equal flame,
Like them in beauty should be like in fame.
Here hills and vales, the woodland and the plain,
Here earth and water, seem to strive again;
Not Chaos like together crush’d and bruis’d,
But as the world, harmoniously confus’d:
Where order in variety we see,
And where, tho’ all thing differ, all agree. (7-16)

While the references to Eden and Chaos would undoubtedly remind readers of Milton, the emphasis of the passage is clearly on the model that the natural world provides to the political:
“Where, tho’ all things differ, all agree.” 23 As a symbol, this illustrates Pope’s imperial vision, one that only Britain, and British liberty can ensure. The idea is repeated in an intriguing turn of phrase, as Pope asserts that such a system is “harmoniously confus’d,” suggesting not just the intermingling of elements, but in a more traditional sense, that the fates of all are locked with the others, and that this yoking of fortunes benefits the populace. Yet the power of the forest is not felt only domestically or through its beauty as Pope continues by asserting the dominion of Britain: “Let India boast her plants, nor envy we / the weeping amber or the balmy tree, / While by our oaks the precious loads are born, / And realms commanded which those trees adorn” (29-32). The image of the forest shifts slightly here, with the admission that while there are other, perhaps more beautiful plants, the forest reigns supreme by the use it has in the imperial project, as the oaks are a part of commerce and colonization. 24 The oak, the strongest of Britain’s indigenous trees, was primarily used as the keel of British ships, the backbone of imperialism. This works to undermine the adornment (and natural harmony) of the other trees as a false sense of beauty, as the real pastoral elegance of the stanza is reserved for the order and harmony that Britain provides. For the “realms commanded” there can only be adornment, and not beauty, because real harmony and order, expressed in the content and form of the stanza, can only be found through British liberty.

The final lines of the poem’s opening return from international considerations to boast again of the classical beauty of the forest, though this time with a specific political cause:

See Pan with flocks, with fruits Pomona crown’d
Here blushing Flora paints th’enamel’d ground,

23 It should also be noted that in discussing the political actions of the monarchy in such a generous light, the poet is also working in the mold of Dryden.
24 In classical poetry, imperialism is often represented through the cutting of a tree, as a foreign power exerts influence over a new region. Here, this trope is recast to be a positive act.
Here Ceres’ gift in waving prospect stand,
And nodding tempt the joyful reaper’s hand;
Rich Industry sits smiling on the plains,
And peace and plenty tell a Stuart reigns. (37-42)

The allusions to Greek and Roman gods of shepherding, fruit, flowers, and grain harken back to the golden age where pastoral finds its roots, and elevate Windsor Forest to a level of grandeur and abundance that will fuel the empire, as if the gods endorse the project. While it is easy to write off such passages as weak imitations of Milton, lacking in the gravitas and transcendence of his verse, to do so undermines the ways in which the specific tools of neoclassicism have here been marshalled to express a political message. The listed resources are not simple crops, but are the staples of empire, and only through these agricultural gifts will the empire continue. The final couplet then links the forest to both industry and the peace ushered in by the current monarch which ensures the proper use of the land’s resources. Pope is likely evoking Virgil’s first eclogue, wherein fruit and crops wither on the vine and rot in the field while the people are distracted by a civil war. Like Virgil, Pope reflects his age at the periphery of the poem. While the poet has primarily kept his focus on the natural beauty of the forest, in this and in many other ways, the political discourse of the age has seeped into the images and metaphors of the poem and reformed it in support of empire.

The idea that harmony is linked to the rule of law and liberty will remain a theme throughout the poem, and the former conditions of the lands underscore the point that such abundance is only found through liberty, “A dreary desart and a gloomy waste, / To savage beasts and savage laws a prey, / And kings more and severe” (44-46). The land must embody its politics, and without righteous rule, the land is harsh and barren. To use the term savage is to
raise the spectre of the untamed lands (and peoples) of the west. But Britain is capable of taming such lands and people, as once its own lands suffered from these wild and untamed conditions that dominate the landscape. Such lands were even untouched by the classical gods and nymphs until the rise of law and liberty: “Fair Liberty, Britannia’s Goddess, rears / Her cheerful head, and leads the golden years.” (91-2). The allegory then is very clear: Britain’s power and bounty are derived from liberty and freedom and because of this, the extension of British law outward from the metropole is a just and natural course to plot. The forest, in its many dimensions and effects, is the empire, and both are healthy only as far as they can spread industry and commerce.

As the poem continues, the imagery of natural beauty is further subsumed by the power and wealth that the empire of the seas brings to Britain. This is foreshadowed early through an apostrophe to the river Thames, “Thou too, great father of the British Floods! / With joyful pride survey’st our lofty woods; / Where tow’ring oaks their spreading honours rear, / and future navies on thy shores appears” (217-220). But when the Thames returns later in the poem and addresses the forest in turn, Pope begins to fully elucidate the vision of empire that the poem presents. After first cataloging all the rivers that pale in comparison to the Thames (Including the Tiber (355), the Nile (357), the Volga (361), the Rhine (362) and the Ganges (363)), the Thames then argues that it will usher in “a peaceful reign”(364) that will ensure that “No more my sons shall die with British blood” (365). However, this promised peace of British rule will require a new kind of imperial power: ships.

Thy trees, fair Windsor! Now shall leave their woods,
And half thy forests rush into my floods,
Bear Britain’s thunder and her Cross display,
To the bright regions of the rising day;
Tempt icy seas, where scarce the waters roll,
Where clearer flames glow round the frozen Pole;
Or under southern skies exalt their sails,
Led by new stars, and borne by spicy gales!
For me the balm shall bleed, and amber flow,
The coral redden, and the ruby glow,
The pearly shell its lucid globe infold,
And Phoebus warm the ripening ore to gold (383-94)

This image of the trees flooding out across the water encapsulates the ways in which the British worldview shifts from the domestic to the imperial. While the emphasis of the first half of this passage is clearly on the might of British naval power, the second half is an argument for trade and commerce (the two being linked). Again, while imbued with images of the natural world that define the pastoral genre, this passage takes a very different turn, moving from the local to the global, and making a strong case that the natural world demands that Britain comes to claim its goods and will open for them. Naval power will inspire the gods and the natural world to improve their riches. With the exception of the balm that “shall bleed,” the imagery focuses on improvement, and a world that will find harmony in the dominance of the British fleet. While this obviously idealizes the colonial project, and notably washes away all references to any peoples already in control of these riches, the grandeur of the rhetoric would surely inspire the populace to be moved by the promise of the empire. By piquing the imagination of the people through “new stars” and “spicy gales,” the poem then endorses an understanding of the world as Britain’s oyster. This elevation of commerce and trade is not only new to the genre, but will
itself become a popular trope for the discussion of imperial practices in the poetry of the Atlantic.

Beyond these images of material wealth, the poem always emphasizes the promise of peace and harmony that the world will embody once under the control of Britain. While previous empires were founded on territorial control and the conquering of kingdoms, Britain will now dominate through the control of the seas: “The time shall come, when free as seas or wind / Unbounded Thames shall flow for all mankind, / whole nations enter with each swelling tyde, / And seas but join the regions they divide; / Earth’s distant ends our glory shall behold, / and the new world launch forth to seek the old” (395-400). The dominant images are of order and harmony, as divisions will lessen under the British banner and differences, though remaining, will fade. Nations “enter” the tide peacefully and partake in new freedoms by choice. The passage continues by entertaining the idea that natives from the Americas will visit the forest and enjoy the harmony and peace of the rule of law. While Pope’s idealism is clear, it is easy to see how the atrocities of empire are white-washed as a necessary part of conquest, acceptable in light of the liberty colonized populations will enjoy. The British imagine themselves as faultless, if not generous in the arts and learning they bring to native populations, a myth that will continue globally for many more decades.

Finally, to emphasize the righteousness of British rule, Pope contrasts the goodness and glory that Britain’s ships carry against the backdrop of conquests completed by other empires, and particularly the Spanish:

Oh stretch thy reign, fair Peace! From shore to shore,

‘Till Conquest cease, and slav’ry be no more;

‘Till freed Indians in their native groves
Reap their own fruits and woo their sable loves,

*Peru* once more a race of Kings behold,

And other *Mexico’s* be roof’d with gold.

Exil’d by thee from earth to deepest hell,

In brazen bonds shall barb’rous Discord dwell:

Gigantic Pride, pale Terror, gloomy Care,

And mad Ambition, shall attend her there (405-414)

By alluding obliquely to the genocide and violence promulgated in Mexico and Peru by the Spanish, Pope makes an argument that the English will correct the wrongs of violent Spanish conquest, and puzzlingly insists that British rule would bring an end to slavery, despite Britian’s continued use of slaves for another century.\(^{25}\) The personified values of Discord, Pride, Terror and Ambition, argue again for the harmony and peace that the structures of empire, when based on British liberty, bring to all regions. The combined effect is overtly jingoistic, but in such a way as to justify the ongoing exploitative practices of the mercantile system.

“*Windsor-Forest*” unapologetically argues for the right of the British Empire to use its naval power to reign over vast regions and people. By innovating the traditional genre of the pastoral, Pope extends the sentiments accorded to natural beauty into an argument for the natural right of Britain’s empire. Through carefully measured proportions of classical mythology and contemporary events, Pope enters an argument for empire into the public debate, and harnesses the aesthetic values of poetry to add credence to the arguments made. Each couplet works to elevate the functions of empire and the roles of those in government and commerce in such a way as to effect public sentiment to inspire others to condone the course of empire. While these

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\(^{25}\) As I will discuss in Chapter Four, this treaty also gives Britain control of the Asiento, expanding its role in the slave trade.
sentiments will come under increasing scrutiny once they reach the distant shores described, the greatest legacy of Pope is this early articulation of the vocabulary through which imperial practices will be debated. If Pope’s argument is that the British Empire has the right to rule vast and far-flung territories because of the liberty and order it will bring those people (through trade), then subsequent poets will further debate the form that trade takes, and how effective the liberty exported actually is. Thus “Windsor-Forest” sets the terms of an important debate that will continue in the poetry of the Atlantic.

James Thomson, who is a central figure in Kaul’s study because of his poems “Rule, Brittainia!” and “Liberty.” Of the two, the latter adds a significant dimension to the work done in Pope’s poem by strengthening the connection between the ancient world and contemporary Britain. In an ambitious poem broken into five books, Thomson presents the history of liberty told to him by the allegorical figure herself, and presenting much of world history as a function of Liberty’s (often literal) march towards Britain. The five books present Liberty’s journey from the pastoral world of Ancient Greece through the major Greek societies to Rome, and then her eventual settlement (and contentment) in Britain. While often dismissed for its tediousness and lack of resonating theme, the poem presents a curious teleological history of liberty, rewriting all known world events as a function of Liberty’s actions: Liberty has always been the highest figure of humanity, and has merely been waiting for mankind to reach a state of worthiness, and in Britain that worthiness is attained. This personification places Britain at the forefront of freedom and rights across deep time in a way that more subtle or deliberate allusions could not. When the poet meets the goddess in Rome, where she mourns the fall of Italian society to its modern state, she is an embodiment of both liberty and Britain:

When straight, methought, the fair majestic power
Of Liberty appeared. Not, as of old,
Extended in her hand the cap, and rod,
Whose slave-enlarging touch gave double life:
But her bright temples bound with British oak,
And naval honours nodded on her brow.
Sublime of port loose o’er her shoulders flowed
Her sea-green robe, with constellations gay.
An island-goddess now; and her high care
The queen of isles, the mistress of the main.

My heart beat filial transport at the sight. (I.25-35)

Liberty’s appearance has been transformed from the images of the ancient world and now fully embodies the island of Britain. As such, she is a product of the empire of the seas, down to her oaken crown of “naval honors” and oceanic garb. Though admitting difference from ages past, the poet makes clear that Liberty now takes her true form and derives her power from Britain, where she gives her greatest boons to man: “Hence Britain, learn—my best established, last, /
And, more than Greece or Rome, my steady reign; / The land where, king and people equal bound / by guardian laws, my fullest blessings flow” (I.316-20). Thomson places law as not a limitation or restriction of freedom, but rather as the tool of liberty which ensures the freedom of all Britons under the monarchy; only through this system will the “fullest blessings flow.” Liberty’s purpose within the poem is to shield mankind from pride, rage, and lust in all human history, but it is only in Britain that she is able “to raise them to assert /the native rights of their race” (I. 344-5). Thus Thomson, like Pope, makes a clear case for British exceptionalism founded almost solely in the cause of liberty and the fulfillment of its promise in man.
The greatest accomplishment of Thomson’s imagination was to rewrite human history as constantly tied to the cause of Liberty and her presence or absence within a given society. The breadth of this argument reflects Thomson’s classical education, as he links such disparate events as the Battle of Thermopylae (II.180), the death of Brutus (III.82), and the flowering of men in Germany (IV.364). Of particular note is the way in which the history of arts and learning is tied directly to the train of liberty. While such a relationship may have been implied in Pope, here the connection between liberty and the arts is made directly, a case that will enhance the myth of the New Rome and be debated for years in Britain. The connection is first made in Book II to explain the flowering of arts in Greece. While music, sculpture and drama are included, it is, of course, poetry that is granted the favored position. Liberty, as patron and creator, distinguishes between lesser forms and the poetry which she alone inspires:

The sweet enforcer of the poet’s strain,

Thine was the meaning music of the heart.

Not the vain trill, that, void of passion, runs

In giddy mazes, tickling idle ears;

But that deep-searching voice, and artful hand,

To which respondant shakes the varied soul. (III.285-90)

Poetry enlightened to truth through liberty awakens a greater awareness in citizens, and a deeper resonance to their very soul. While Thomson has obvious motivations for promoting poetry, this is not wholly a selfish gesture. To him and other poets, the work of portraying liberty and other societal values was immediately tied to the improvement of conditions for all citizens and the expansion of rights throughout the empire. Much of Kaul’s argument is based around the idea

26 Milton, in Paradise Lost, is putting this perspective into action, using his central themes to present the whole of human history as a functioning of liberty and free will.
that whether or not poets had a strong influence initially, by working under the assumption that they did, they ended up shaping the rhetoric of the debates over empire. Thomson continues in Books III and IV to argue that Liberty’s absence from Earth for a time is the actual cause of the Dark Ages and only her return to Italy and then all of Europe saves humanity from the loss of all science, art, and learning. While Thomson is surely not the first to connect arts and liberty, he makes the case more strongly than many poets and thereby adds further evidence for the righteousness of Britain’s expansion.

Shifting both generically and geographically, it’s possible to see how these sentiments and grand plans are embraced and rejected by poets in the Atlantic who both bear more of the weight, and receive less of the bounty of the imperial project. Poets in the colonies, though often motivated by the same values and goals, perceive the processes of empire in a much different light and struggle to find their position within the movements of empire. Poetry published in manuscripts and periodicals often openly debate the relationship with the metropole, no matter the subject of the poem. As early as 1684, Richard Steere, composing a poem of thanksgiving for his survival of a treacherous crossing, betrays a sustained interest in the goods and people crossing the Atlantic (Steere). Occasioned by the storm-plagued voyage of the *Adventure Pinck*, the poem focuses on the human drama, the suffering, and the loss of life that the storm caused. Embedded within the poem, however, are catalogs of many ships encountered headed for the metropole and the cargos they bear, content that filled areas throughout newspapers in the announcement of arrivals and news of maritime distress. In this way, the commercial discourse of the newspaper has cross-pollinated the poetry that also circulated within its columns. At times poems such as Steere’s echo the language of advertisements placed around them. Ships encountered are viewed within the context of trade, and each tragedy that befalls them is
underscored by both human and commercial loss. The loss of the trade ship is repeatedly given first in cargo and second in men: “She from East India came, / Under command of Captain Hide by Name / Burden Six hundred tuns and Ninety Men, / Having about ten months from India been” (Steere). The cargo is certainly not meant to overshadow the loss of life, but it is always accounted for throughout the poem. Later, in order to plug leaks, the crew must sacrifice all manner of commercial goods to save the ship from sinking: “Then they cry / For Bedding, Ruggs, and Blankets eagerly. / … /Over those ruggs they added skins of Bears, / and two new clothes which our mainsail spares” (Steere 5). With many small gestures like this, it is clear that the poet is motivated by forces other than simply relating a clear version of the events. Yet while the poem is most clearly focused on the grace of God that allows for the poet’s (and other passengers’) survival, these gestures show that there is a concern in the wide readership for the movement of goods and the functioning of trade.

The sudden onset of the mighty storm affords Steere the opportunity to dramatize the heroism of the crew, and while there is a natural affinity towards the men who helped in his salvation, Steere lavishes extra heroism on them, elevating the rank and file mariners into pillars of humanity that tempt nature itself. As the hull begins to leak, “The Masters mate tears from his back his Coat / and stuffs between the Timbers,” and later “Ropes fore and Aft were stretched to secure / The Mariners, who scarcely could endure / Those big-swel’d Billows, (What are feeble men?)” (Steere 5). The awesome power of the storm may dwarf the men, but the admiration for their actions is clear throughout, as their actions maintain the functioning of the empire, and they themselves are humble and pious, often pausing “up to their knees in water” (6) for quick prayers. The elevation of these figures is both a function of the dramatic conflict of the poem and a recognition of the role these mariners play in the trade and transport that fuel the empire. This
is a logical extension of the substitution of trade and naval might for the conquest and martial might of the empires of antiquity. To Steere and others, these men represent their nation as fully as the heroes on the fields of Troy represented theirs. Indeed, the woodcut attached to the publication shows a ship under full sail climbing a steep wave while still flying British colors, a heroic image completely contradicting the details of the poem it adorns, in which the ship is stripped of sail and mast as the storm continues. While the almighty may take the lion’s share of credit for the poet’s salvation, the mariners represent admirable qualities and stand as heroes, and specifically British heroes.

The rising tide of commerce and trade raises the appreciation for many of the lowly roles associated with trade and commerce as the century unfolds. What becomes clear from reading many poems is that the citizens of colony and metropole understood the widespread implication of what was being undertaken. If commerce and trade fueled the empire, then the diplomats, merchants, mariners, and farmers all played a role in the advance of liberty and arts throughout the Atlantic realm. The common poets seem to have a reverence for these contemporary figures (Think Markland’s tribute to Lieutenant-Governor Gooch) and particularly for those that helped engineer and build the colonies.

In 1725, Roger Wolcott of New London, Connecticut published a volume of Poetical Meditations that, while primarily focused on Biblical verses and accounts of the fallen state of man, contains within it an example of what would become a widely used poetic motif, a tribute to the founder of a colony. The poem, “A Brief Account of the Agency of the Honourable John Winthrop, Esq; in the court of King Charles the Second, Anno Dom. 1662,” offers a poetic interpretation of the events that led to Winthrop being granted the charter for the colony of Connecticut. The poem begins with a recognition of the larger geopolitical landscape, placing the
decision to seek the charter in the immediate wake of Charles II reclaiming the throne: “These happy tidings soon found out their way, / Unto the English in America; / Who join with Britain in Celebration, / of their just Princes happy restauration” (20). Having new opportunity to lay claim to the land, the “Sages of Connecticut” send “Learned Winthrop” to make the request. Winthrop rises as a mythical figure in his own right but will also give due honor toward his predecessors in the colony as well. As he makes the request, Winthrop’s logic is a mirror of that of Pope, as he argues that by taming the land and bringing order to it, the men of Connecticut have earned the charter:

Your Royal Favour in the thing we want;
T’ Incorporate us by your CHARTER-Grant
The Land we’ve Purchas’d, or Subdu’d by Fight
And Bought of Fenwick what was Warwick’s Right,
And all at the endeavor of our Own,
Without the least Disbursment from the Throne. (23)

While “subdu’d” is an egregious euphemism to modern audiences, the appeal is not wholly unlike that made by the British as they expanded. They will bring order to the wilds and will refine it through industry.

Unmoved, Charles requests that Winthrop recite the history of the land and his people to further justify the charter. Winthrop obliges, and over the seceding 60 pages unfolds an epic tale of heroic mariners, devout religious figures, and great armies that overcame the savage Peaquots. Winthrop, who successfully moves the king to grant the charter, is a hero in his humility to the throne, but more so for his reverence to the founders and forefathers who sacrificed much to
“subdue” the lands. The final appeal merges both, while making a case for the ways in which the Connecticut residents have begun to bring order to the lands:

Since this our towns have spread the Country o’re,

Both on the River and along the Shore

Which with English names Your Subjects stile

Dear rememberance of our Parent Isle

The Land thus either Purchas’d or Subdu’d,

Was our Intent then Early to have sued,

The Throne, where your Illustrious Father sate,

That he would Graciously incorporate

Us, by his Royal Charter, with such liberty,

As I petition from your majesty (73-4).

After the grandeur and violence of the war with the natives just portrayed, the act of naming seems almost trivial, but through the naming the colonists bring a British order to the lands, and having subdued the native populations, the flowering of liberty (through the sought-for commercial charter) amongst true British subjects can commence. The way in which Winthrop attaches these actions to a condemnation of the rebellion further asserts a loyalty to the crown on behalf of Connecticut. By rehearsing these arguments 60 years later, Wolcott reaffirms that commitment and celebrates the “English-ness” of the Connecticut population through the founders. Wolcott views Connecticut as a direct participant in the struggle to expand British liberty over sea and land, and though many in the metropole would disagree, he seems to suggest that, as loyal subjects, they are every bit as affected by matters of state as the population in
England, if not more so due to their direct role in the expansion of empire. Even separated by many generations from the founders, Wolcott still celebrates his role as a loyal subject, only ever referring to Winthrop and his contemporaries as English or “English in America.” Through the elevated status of founders and merchants, many poets in the colonies will continue to debate and negotiate their subjectivity through similar works.

These colonial sentiments, and the elevation of the lowly practices in commerce to heroic stature are perhaps never more clear than in James Grainger’s 1763 georgic The Sugar-Cane, which, in its four books, contains many examples of how the imperial project shapes perspectives on all aspects of life in the colonies. Grainger, a British physician turned planter in colonial Jamaica, writes a lengthy volume that tackles all aspects of planting and farming the titular staple of commerce. Grainger appropriates the classical genre of the georgic and composes a highly didactic poem meant to instruct other colonial planters. Covering everything from soil types to the treatment of slaves, Grainger pauses frequently throughout the poem to comment on the practices of empire, and emphasizes the role of the planter in ensuring the success of noble commerce and the empire itself. This action, romanticizing the planter to near heroic significance, gestures towards the epic at times, but is rooted in teaching others how to be such heroes (The Telemachiad cross-pollinated with a gardening manual). Weaving together classical allusions, an epic tone and meter, and references to other colonial powers, Grainger’s rich poem represents a confluence of many of the formulations found throughout the Atlantic world, including the empire of the seas, commerce, heroic founding figures, and the dual vision of an empire that is akin to, but subsumes all classical and competing powers.

Though clearly working in the georgic, Grainger imbues his verse with many passages of pastoral beauty, using many classical conventions which have the effect of elevating his rather
lowly subject to an ambitious extent (though perhaps gratingly so to modern audiences). The opening lines of the poem announce his style as he invokes a muse to instruct him on the specific matters of the planter, including “What soil the Cane affects; what care demands; / Beneath what signs to plant; what ills await; / How the hot nectar best to christallize; / And Afric's sable progeny to treat.” Though very different in quality, the subjects are united by the desire to produce the best cane for superior trade and support the empire through the staple crop. Yet, as the invocation to the muse continues, Grainger makes a plea for inspiration to place his verse amongst much of the greater pastoral and georgic poetry:

    Spirit of Inspiration, that did'st lead
    Th' Ascrean Poet to the sacred Mount,
    And taught'st him all the precepts of the swain;
    Descend from Heaven, and guide my trembling steps
    To Fame's eternal Dome, where Maro reigns;
    Where pastoral Dyer, where Pomona's Bard,
    And Smart and Sommerville in varying strains,
    Their sylvan lore convey: O may I join
    This choral band, and from their precepts learn
    To deck my theme, which though to song unknown,
    Is most momentous to my Country's weal!

This curious mix of poets demonstrates Grainger’s desire to be placed among the best of pastoral and georgic of all periods, as he includes Hesiod (The Ascrean Poet\textsuperscript{27}), seventeenth century

\textsuperscript{27} The phrasing of this reference, and his choice of Hesiod, echo Milton.
English poets Dyer and Sommerville, and places Virgil (Maro) at the top.\textsuperscript{28} But interestingly, the final gesture makes a nationalist turn, “To deck my theme, which though to song unknown, / Is most momentous to my Country’s weal!,” indicating that the inspiration is not being requested for the enlightenment or fame of the poet, but for the improvement of the national cause. This is further emphasized in the final lines of the invocation where Grainger asks that the poem be pleasing to Aurelius, the governor of the island, and “Imperial George, monarch of the main,” both of whom represent the government and the direction of the colony.

Thus, from the onset, we see that despite this poem’s role in the instruction of planters, it is participating in the advancement of the colonial project, as the presence of commerce and the empire of the seas is what drives the sugar trade and makes the cultivation of sugar important. Shields forwards this argument, but also adds that the work of planting warranted inclusion in poems due to the sheer effort planting took to complete: “The labor required for the creation of farms seemed truly heroic. Thus the Americans felt no embarrassment at presenting the business of agriculture as a matter of poetry” (92). Grainger is unapologetic in this regard, never giving the slightest doubt that the business of producing sugar cane is a heroic endeavor, and that the plant itself is a symbol of the power of empire, as it helps tame nature and make foreign lands productive. When invoking a Muse for the incredibly low task of describing compost, Grainger states that the Muse would not find this a base task, and because of this the planter should similarly embrace it: “Never, ah never, be asham’d to tread / Thy dung-heaps, where the refuse of thy mills…” If the activity will foster the growth and abundance of the cane, then it is noble work worthy of the planter and the muse.\textsuperscript{29} To Grainger, nothing is more heroic than the cane

\textsuperscript{28} Grainger, in using “Descent from Heaven,” may also be trying to include Milton among these other figures.
\textsuperscript{29} Grainger also notes the awkward union of poetry and subjects such as this in his preface, using his classical predecessors to authorize the song: “It must be confessed, that terms of art look awkward in poetry, yet didactic compositions cannot wholly dispense with them. Accordingly we find that Hesiod and Virgil, among the ancients,
and the trade it provides, and it buoys up all related activities. Sugar cane becomes “supreme of plants” or is most frequently referred to as “The Cane,” or with epithets such as “Noble,” “lofty,” and “The lawful lord.” In fact, the cane frequently functions as a symbol of the British Empire for the ways in which it supports commerce, and promotes the cultivation and taming of the native soils.

Much of the first book of the poem follows through on the promise of the invocation to examine the soils and growing conditions that best support the growth and flourishing of the best cane, using language peppered with classical comparisons through which the Caribbean soils prove superior: “Not Grecian Tempe, where Arcadian Pan, / Knit with the graces, … /…can vie, blessed Island with thee.” The pastoral beauty and wildness of the islands are promoted, but, as in Pope, always in the context of how they can be cultivated and turned productive: “Such the glad soil, from whence Jamaica's sons / Derive their opulence: thrice fertile land, / The pride, the glory of the sea-girt isles, / Which, like to rich and various gems, inlay / The unadorned bosom of the deep.” The island almost craves agriculture and lies “unadorned” only as long as it must. Although the beauty is grand (and the origin of its blessings divine), the real beauty, as in traditional georgics, is in the cultivation of the land and particularly of the cane: “Thy fame should float familiar thro' the world; / Each plant should own thy Cane her lawful lord.”

Although the poem frequently refers to the divine opulence and grandeur of the island and the bounty which awaits those that harness the fertile lands, the most prominent figure of these early passages is not God, but rather Christopher Columbus. Grainger gives much credit to Columbus for the discovery of this land and for the role he played in the foundation of agriculture and trade there. In fact, the first passage on the land’s natural beauty begins by

with Philips and Dyer, (not to mention some other poets now living in our own country); have been obliged to insert them in their poems. Their example is a sufficient apology for me, for in their steps I shall always be proud to tread.”
invoking the explorer: “Such, green St. Christopher, thy happy soil!” and ends by pronouncing that all of this is only known because “first Columbus' daring keel explor'd.” This is, of course, fairly egregious by modern standards as it pardons Columbus of his role in the subjugation of indigenous people. However, in the eighteenth century this is an early example of poems that laid claim to Columbus and canonized him as a hero of uniquely great stature. But what is of note here is that Columbus’s heroism is based in his command of the seas and his taming of the wilds, the values that are central to many poets’ justification of the imperial project. Grainger pauses after the initial mention of Columbus to offer a more full-throated pronouncement of his heroism:

Daughters of Heaven, with reverential awe,
Pause at that godlike name; for not your flights
Of happiest fancy, can outsoar his fame.

Columbus, boast of science, boast of man!
Yet, by the great, the learned, and the wise,
Long held a visionary; who, like thee,
Could brook their scorn; wait seven long years at court,
A selfish, sullen, dilatory court;
Yet never from thy purpos'd plan decline?
No God, no Hero, of poetic times,
In Truth's fair annals, may compare with thee!

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30 This tradition can be said to culminate in Joel Barlow’s *Columbiad*.
In this astounding passage, Grainger pauses in his instruction of the planter to instruct the Muses and insist that no idle “fancy” could ever compare to his stature. The case made is based on science and intelligence, a new definition of heroism which Grainger suggests puts Columbus ahead of all figures of antiquity. The stanza goes on with a similarly inflated tone to culminate with tying Columbus not just to learning but also to commerce: “Dear to the Nine, thy glory shall remain / While winged Commerce either ocean ploughs; / While its lov’d pole the magnet coyly shuns; / While weeps the guaiac, and while joints the Cane.” The interweaving of Columbus, cane, and commerce is meant to inspire the audience and demonstrate the heroism of all three by association; Columbus becomes an anglicized hero of colonial culture.

While the bulk of the poem (across all four books) is a thorough explanation of all the best practices for the cultivation of sugar cane, there is always the specter of colonialism informing many metaphors and allusions, and creating larger resonances for the action of the poem which would be clear to the contemporary audience. The poem’s guiding aesthetic is one that again merges natural beauty and commercial/political value. If sugar cane is a key staple of commerce, then Grainger feels free to make claims about empire around the edges of his poem’s main purpose and themes. This extension begins about midway through the first book, when Grainger lets the sugar cane become emblematic of the British Empire itself and warns of the danger of the French in which improper cultivation would result:

As, not indulg’d, the richest lands grow poor;
And Liamuiga may, in future times,
If too much urg’d, her barrenness bewail:

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31 Refers to the guaiacum, a flower common to many islands of the Caribbean (and the national flower of Jamaica), though the reference bears a particularly cruel twist of irony to modern readers as the name comes from the Tainos of the Caribbean and is thought to be the first American word to be added to the English language.
So cultivation, on the shallowest soil,
O'erspread with rocky cliffs, will bid the Cane,
With spiry pomp, all bountifully rise.
Thus Britain's flag, should discipline relent,
'Spite of the native courage of her sons,
Would to the lily strike: ah, very far,
Far be that woful day: the lily then
Will rule wide ocean with resistless sway;
And to old Gallia's haughty shore transport
The lessening crops of these delicious isles.

This is a striking passage for the ways in which it layers meaning in its metaphors, as it is at once a warning about how improper cultivation will ruin the fertility and splendor of the islands (here represented by Liamuiga, a mountain on St. Kitts) and put the empire at risk. Though cane may take root, thin soil is not a strong enough foundation for the plant, and could lead to collapse. Through simile, the analogy is drawn to the empire directly with discipline standing as the core value meant to ensure the stability of the Empire. Finally, it warns of the dangers of France through the emblem of the lily, and how the weaker nation will subsume England and profit off the fallen state of the islands. The comparison of Britain as cane and France as lily is clearly meant to belittle the French, but note that the sign of power is, once again, the ability to “rule wide ocean” and have command of trade. The poet is keenly aware that holding sway over the Caribbean requires naval power. The implication is also that the French lack the ability to coax

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32 A drum Grainger will beat throughout the poem, as, not unlike in Milton, the key to imperial success is the discipline of all parties: “Then let not man for little selfish ends, / (Britain, remember this important truth;) /Presume the principle to counteract / Of universal love.”
the lands to their full capacity, and thus all would suffer with lesser goods. The French come up again in the third book of the poem where they are painted more outrightly as treacherous, and false in commercial dealings: “False Gallia's sons, that hoe the ocean-isles, / Mix with their Sugar, loads of worthless sand, / Fraudful, their weight of sugar to increase. / Far be such guile from Britain's honest swains.” While this is certainly more about honesty than any other value, there is an added stake to the conflict, as France’s control of Atlantic commerce would result in not only lesser quality goods, but in swindling, making France unfit to command the seas and to ensure profits for all.

There are many other striking analogies and metaphors that demonstrate the poet’s concern with the might of empire. Ordering and plotting fields is equated to the martial actions of a brave commander: “So when a monarch rushes to the war, / To drive invasion from his frightened realm; / Some delegated chief the frontier views, /And to each squadron, and brigade, assigns / Their order'd station,” and hurricanes subside “as when in Indian forests, wild, / Barbaric armies suddenly retire / After some furious onset.” These references keep the audience cognizant of the imperial setting of the poem, and demonstrate that the role of empire is on the mind of the poet and other colonists. Though much of this imagery is military, it is presented in such a way as to wash away any thought of violence or brutality and to emphasize harmony and order instead. Like the work of the poem itself, this gives form to the formless values of the period. Much as slavery is refined in the lines of the poem to lose any sign of cruelty and violence, so to is the entirety of the colonial project. While this immediately feels false and deceptive, which it is, it also shows that, even to those in the colonies who are often exploited in the mercantile system, there is, at least initially, a strong desire to justify and support the empire.
The emphasis is never on the violent processes of empire or of plantation life, but is always placed squarely on the benefits to planter and metropole alike.

As is clear in many of the lines quoted above, the central metaphor of the poem is cultivation. Of land, of people, and of empire, cultivation flows from the industry of agriculture and improves all associated with it. Thus, Grainger is forwarding a view of the march of liberty trope, as self-improvement will come through the actual labor of planting, and refine the mind of planter and slave as the activity cultivates the land. But this cultivation still bears a close link to learning and the arts, which make many appearances throughout the poem. In fact, the poet’s initial disclaimer asks pardon of the audience for when he needs to speak as a physician and share news on medicinal uses of plants within the poem. A clear show of learning that is placed specifically to frame the poem. Later, Grainger takes as fact that art has a taming power that is quite akin to planting, arguing, “As art transforms the savage face of things, / And order captivates the harmonious mind; / Let not thy Blacks irregularly hoe: / But, aided by the line, consult the site / Of thy demesnes; and beautify the whole.” These references to order, harmony, and art are all reminiscent of Pope and Thomson’s arguments on liberty. The implication is that these lands await the order of law and regulation (implied here by demesnes) to be complete. In a stanza close to this reference to art, Grainger also pauses to assert the place of his poem within this process of cultivation, presenting it as a cultivation project in its own right: “The task how difficult, to cull the best / From thwarting sentiments; and best adorn / What Wisdom chuses, in poetic garb!” Here the poet sets to order his wisdom by separating it from lesser writings, arguing that, through poetic form, greater clarity of thought is accomplished. This demonstrates that whether the poet has a strong role in public discourse or not, he envisions himself as being an integral part of the process, cultivating and refining his own product as a planter would, and
also for the improvement of the British citizenry.

Late in book three, Grainger makes a decidedly colonial turn, expressing sentiments and opinions that, while they align with British imperial vision, demonstrate points of separation between metropolitan and colonial views. Described by the author in the poem’s argument as “An address to the Creoles, to live more upon their estates than they do. The reasons,” the passage that closes the third book is a fairly forceful defense of life in the Caribbean, and an argument for the superiority of the life of the planter over life back in Britain. Grainger begins by admitting that he misses many of the people and pastimes (particularly conversation and wit) that England afforded him, noting particularly that there are likely already language differences between him and his peers, “How would your converse polish my rude lays, / With what new, noble images adorn?” But this gesture is brief, as Grainger hastily asserts the benefits of life in the Caribbean using the (perhaps by now, tired) language of cultivation: “Then should I scarce regret the banks of Thames, / All as we sat beneath that sand-box shade; / Whence the delighted eye expatiates wide / O'er the fair landscape; where in loveliest forms, / Green cultivation hath array'd the land.” There is a certain pride in the work of cultivation that is being conveyed here. As master of his land, he is content to enjoy the new order, the fruits of his overseeing of the plantation. He is further comforted by the sight of his mills and beyond them, and the “cultured soil” he can survey the agents of commerce directly, surveying the ocean full of “sail-clad ships, with their sweet produce fraught, / Swell on the straining sight,” and “That town, emboivered in the different shade / Of tamarinds, panspans, and papaws, o'er which / A double Iris throws her painted arch, / Shows commerce toiling in each crowded street, / And each throng'd street with limpid currents lav'd.” Here, Grainger mixes pastoral imagery with the infrastructure of commerce in a fashion that mirrors the dotting of the cultivated lands with crops, mills, and
towns. There’s still an appreciation for the natural world, but the trappings of commerce are portrayed just as lovingly. In trying to convince his contemporaries to remain in their plantations, Grainger aims first at convincing them of the beauty that being on the forefront of colonialism allows one to see in the interworking parts of the empire.

Grainger continues the argument by insisting that the riches and extravagancies of Europe all pale in comparison to what he has in Jamaica. With a seemingly genuine incredulity, Grainger asks, “While such fair scenes adorn these blissful isles; / Why will their sons, ungrateful, roam abroad? / Why spend their opulence in other climes?” It seems that he is quite content to live out his life in the islands, and profit from his cane in perpetuity. In fact, as he casts aspersion on all the luxuries that might attract other men back to Europe, he credits commerce and the cane for making the pursuit of them beyond the shores unnecessary: “Besides, the Cane / Wafted to every quarter of the globe, Makes the vast produce of the world your own.” Thus Grainger is forced to conclude that it is best to “Leave Europe; there, through all her coyest ways.” This seems to go against both what poets such as Pope and Thomson suggest, and against our common understanding of the mercantile system, which is predicated on the idea that the metropole benefits from the colonies. While we must recognize that this is significantly informed by the privileged position of the plantation overseer, but throughout the poem Grainger describes much of his own labor related to cane production. The passage is not motivated by any kind of civic duty or responsibility to the larger processes. Instead, it’s an insistence on the comfort and happiness to be found by staying in the colonies and enjoying the fruits (literal and figurative) of the plantation.

Yet the poem’s final book closes with a message much closer to imperial propaganda, as having now shared all that there is to learn of sugar cane, Grainger will close with a full-throated
endorsement of Britain’s continued dominance of commerce and the sea, and the glory it brings to all its citizens:

She shall not crouch; if Wisdom guide the helm,
Wisdom that bade loud Fame, with justest praise,
Record her triumphs! bade the lacquaying winds
Transport, to every quarter of the globe,
Her winged navies! bade the scepter'd sons
Of earth acknowledge her pre-eminence!–
She shall not crouch; if these Cane ocean-isles,
Isles which on Britain for their all depend,
And must for ever; still indulgent share
Her fostering smile: and other isles be given,
From vanquish'd foes.–And, see, another race!
A golden æra dazzles my fond sight!
That other race, that long'd-for æra, hail!
The British George now reigns, the Patriot King!
Britain shall ever triumph o'er the main.

Infused with maritime imagery, the passage marks a full return to the tropes of naval power, liberty, and learning triumphing throughout the world. Grainger’s belief in the cane and the empire it supports is complete, and will necessarily lead to a golden age of British liberty. While he may enjoy his life as a planter more than life in the metropole, he gives all credit to the “Patriot King” and empire.
What is perhaps most astonishing about the poem, besides its dizzying fusion of genres and the elevation it grants such base activities, is the lateness with which it appears. While it is folly to overextend the views of one poet to be representative of a region or even a hemisphere, Grainger is still much enamored of the empire in the 1760s, when increasing tensions begin their rise to the forefront. His purpose throughout, though specifically occasioned by the instruction of others in the way of planting, is to support commerce and thereby support the empire for the improvement of his station and that of all other lawful subjects (the toll the process takes on the slaves is of little interest to him). Yet, in the rest of the colonies, sentiments are already changing and the iconography that has been established with poems such as I have explored here will quickly be turned against the colonial powers as the new world begins to assert its independence from the old. The culture and learning that was planted in the New World take root and push the colonists to assert themselves and their political will to separate from Europe, but underlying all these actions is the same commitment to the promise of liberty and a new form of society based on freedom and natural rights. 33

As the poets of the Atlantic continue to rework the tropes, imagery, and genres of the poetics of liberty to better fit the shifting landscape to which they are all now bound, the iconography and vocabulary found here in these poems will continually be expanded, limited and revised. As the eighteenth century progresses, there is a circular relationship that repeats itself as poets and poetry help to authorize the expansion of empire, and the expansion of empire results in further changes to poetry, and new populations that will embody their own views and voice through verse. While commerce and naval power will continue to be an important segment of colonial debate, emphasis in pastoral and georgic poetry, as well as many other genres, will shift

33 It should be noted, however, that Jamaica’s colonial history cannot be conflated with that of the US, though there are commonalities, the history is much different.
away from these values and more toward a focus on liberty and individual rights and freedoms in a variety of Atlantic spaces. However, the iconography explored here will continue to hold sway throughout the age of revolutions, and will be recast and redeployed to distinguish the colonies from Britain in the early decades of the nineteenth century.
In 1675, Waitstill Winthrop, poet and grandson of John Winthrop, composed a poem entitled “Some Meditations Concerning our Honourable Gentlemen and Fellow-Soldiers, in Pursuit of Those Barbarous Natives in the Narragansitt-Country; and their Service There.” The poem was a tribute to the English colonists who, in the face of growing conflict with the natives of New England, were choosing to not only stand their ground, but push the fight further into the land of the Narragansett in order to secure more space for the blooming population of colonists. In his opening stanzas, Winthrop marks the particular occasion and gestures beyond to the root of the conflict, in the eyes of the settlers:

When I do Muse, I can’t but chuse
But mind Gods hand therein,
How he at first, the Indians dispersed,
That English might begin,

The ground to till, the land to fill,
With men and eke with Beasts.
This fifty year, some have been here,
And have enjoyed Peace.

The Indians then, were as strong men,
As now they seem to be,
And yet two men, wou’d chace twice ten
And make them for to flee.\[34\] (Winthrop)

Winthrop uses these opening lines to set up a familiar argument: the colonists have more of a right to the land held by the natives because only the colonists will fulfill the promise of the land’s productivity via agriculture and cultivation (memorably framed as “the ground to till, the land to fill”). Although God has “first, the Indians dispersed,” the promised moment has arrived when now the land can reach its full potential, and only through English stewardship can the true fruitfulness of the land be realized.

Despite labeling the natives as “Barbarous Natives” in the title, Winthrop generally expresses surprise at the changing dynamics of colonist and native communities. After the above reference to the native’s fear in the sight of settlers, he then recounts a happier time when pleasantries were exchanged when Natives chanced upon Englishmen: they “were afraid / the English to offend, / When they did meet’em in the street, / their words were What Cheer Friend” (Winthrop). This idealized depiction of the relationship between the natives and the English allows Winthrop to emphasize the shock of the now violent relationship between the two communities, but it also establishes for his readership a particular perception of the Native community, one wherein the natives exist as a separate but similar community, evolving and changing over time just as the colonists did and continue to do. As the colonists push outward, their awareness of that community grows, as does the importance of understanding the neighboring tribes. Winthrop further explains that the tensions have arisen as the English community has grown (“There was not ten / where thousands now appear”) and that similar

\[34\] The text used here is from a 1721 reprint of the original poem. “Some Meditations Concerning our Honourable Gentlemen and Fellow-Soldiers, in Pursuit of Those Barbarous Natives in the Narragansitt-Country; and their Service There” April 4, 1721. Broadside. New London.
growth in the Native population has led to them being “both near and far/ abroad and at our door” (Winthrop).

While these characterizations are all prologue to Winthrop’s account of the fighting between the factions, he is establishing these two communities as serial constituencies. While different in custom and demeanor, they do not differ greatly in how they interact with each other and the needs they have for land and freedom. That is, they are parallel in structure and equally deserving of liberty. Conceptualizing of these serial communities will be central to the evolving perceptions of the role of empire in the Atlantic world, and as many scholars have noted, the rise of the nation. Winthrop deploys the latter term on two occasions in the poem, as he mobilizes his fellow colonists into this ongoing fight. Winthrop does not appeal to his fellow English to all take up arms in this conflict directly, but rather, he asserts that all colonists need to renounce their lives of sin which God is punishing through the violence of the natives:

All who are wise, will sympathize
With this our English Nation,
And sorely grieve, and help relieve,
Them there in this sad nation.

O Lord arise, and open the eyes,
Of this our English Nation,
And let them see, and also be,
Saved with thy salvation. (Winthrop)

Then later, in a passage describing the Natives:
A swarm of flies, that may arise,
A nation to annoy,
Yea rats and mice, and swarms of lice,
A Nation may destroy. (Winthrop)

As these passages suggest, early usage of the term nation in the New World often arises from the need to distinguish the various factions, peoples, and social groups throughout the region. Here, meant to describe the colonists themselves, it has a quite particular use. Nation is used to describe the community that includes the soldiers who are actively fighting and the other colonists in New England to whom Winthrop addresses his poem. Indeed these are the nation that the natives “annoy” and the nation that can act to “destroy.” There is no mention here of the larger imperial power or any type of aid that may come from overseas. Instead, Winthrop uses nation to mean the English of New England. However, perhaps the most striking element of these stanzas is the clear degradation of the Natives from men with cheerful greetings down to a pure pestilence akin to “rats and mice, and swarms of lice,” a gesture that aligns more closely with the title of the poem. While this is in part a result of the intervening stanzas’ descriptions of the violence these Natives inflicted upon the colonists, the poem clearly demonstrates the manners in which the colonists in the New World conceptualized the native population over time, and how these conceptualizations redefined their own identity in turn. That is, as the English continued to expand, they discovered more and more peoples that necessitated new dynamics in the dialectic on liberty. As the models were continually expanded and stretched

35 “Six score and ten of Valiant Men, / was wounded in the fight, / and fifty more, if not three score, / was slain thereby out-right” (Winthrop).
throughout the region, the poetics of liberty became a way to authorize such expansion, or the reasons why such a nation could not be incorporated.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the ways in which native populations throughout the New World are represented in the poetry that circulated in British North America and England. Through this examination, I will argue that poetry plays a significant role in the formation and conceptualization of parallel communities that will contribute directly to the rise of the nation as the eighteenth century progresses. As poets of the period worked to refine the understanding and application of British liberty, the poetics of liberty became a means of representing other collectives with which Britons interacted. Recent reframings of Benedict Anderson’s paradigm-shifting *Imagined Communities*, while correcting many misconceptions and anachronisms at the foundation of the theory, have continued to neglect the role of poetry in shifting the perceptions of colonists and broadening their imaginations to include the variety of communities, peoples, and factions that exist outside of and within the imperial framework of the eighteenth century. Poets of the Atlantic world, as this chapter will demonstrate, were deeply invested in exploring, understanding, and presenting the political and social communities of the Atlantic, including natives, religious communities and agencies, and competing imperial powers. Through their presentation of these communities and factions, the poets of the Atlantic world established a variety of communities that existed in parallel to the colonists themselves, both simultaneously and across “deep time.”  

Finally, I will argue that the poets, both directly and indirectly, present a vision of empire that argues for the centrality of the imperial project in

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36 I borrow this term from Wai Chee Dimock, who coined the phrase in her book *Through Other Continents* to describe the relations of texts and peoples more broadly. According to Dimock, “[Deep time] is a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive fabric” (4).
binding these serial communities, a role that will fall to the nation as the eighteenth century progresses.

Benedict Anderson’s 1983 study of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, rightfully remains a major influence on the study of texts throughout the eighteenth century. As Anderson argues, the rise of printing in the eighteenth century gives rise to a distinctly different apprehension of time. Quoting from Walter Benjamin, Anderson asserts a conception of homogenous empty time is central to any conception of this period, a conception “In which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (24). Marking a shift from medieval typological conceptions of time, this new perception demonstrates an understanding of time existing across communities, and of communities experiencing time in a similar fashion. This then gives rise to the earliest conceptions of nation, or as Anderson explains: “The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history” (26). These cultural roots of the nation speak directly toward the perceptions of the peoples through which the nation arises, rather than through any exterior political force or dramatic reorganization. This specific understanding of the simultaneity of various communities of people evolves throughout the eighteenth century as people become increasingly aware of how others move and have moved through time. As I will demonstrate, the poetics of liberty are a means of improving these conversations from Atlantic studies to account for a range of perspectives that were created, expressed, and circulated in the Atlantic world. While these processes had been evolving for nearly 100 years prior to the period I will be
discussing, the events of the eighteenth century made questions of policy more pressing and the litmus test provided by the dialectic on liberty proved invaluable.

While many subsequent theorists have propagated this version of simultaneity at the roots of nationalism, many have taken issue with the sources that Anderson chose for this reframed apprehension of time. Anderson primarily attributes the rise of simultaneity in Europe to the rise of the novel and the periodical, both of which demonstrate the spatial and temporal relationships that exist within and between communities (25-26). Furthermore, Anderson cites the existence of imperial functionaries who circulate between communities and experience these relationships most directly. Many critics, including Ed White, in his article “Early American Nations as Imagined Communities,” explain that the historical record simply cannot support these arguments as the circulation of functionaries and the rise of North American printers (and their newspapers) occur at much different periods. Beyond this, White argues that Anderson troublingly elides important differences in the structure and cultures of communities throughout North America, particularly those of the 13 colonies and Central and South American colonies (56-7). Because of these historical flaws, White asserts that Anderson’s theory needs to be “tweaked and clarified” (59) in order to represent the historical reality that gave rise to these conceptions of simultaneity.

In order to reconcile Anderson’s theory of nationalism with the historical reality of the early eighteenth century, White argues for a new understanding of the roots of this shift in the apprehension of time through unbound seriality. To White, unbound seriality is the conception “that certain categories are universal and applicable to zones outside of bound totality” (61). That is, there exist institutions, ideals, and practices that are applicable across communities that are differentiated via other categorizations. The existence of these communities of people
demonstrates that there are serial nations that exist in tandem, but that are perceived to share qualities across bound totalities. As White goes on to explain, such perceptions have a clear underpinning based in the ways that communities project their codes and social structures onto the serial nations with which they coexist: “Underlying this unbound sense of series is the grammar of ‘the modeling process,’ whereby other totalities model themselves on the apparently universal terms either through the formulation of new institutions or via analogy and translation” (61). In other words, the communities, either directly or indirectly, begin to understand other communities and themselves through categorizations that are perceived as universal, such as sacred institutions, status and class ranks, and influential values. These perceptions then lead to the identification of serial nations existing in parallel that function in a manner akin to that of the colonists. Whether such perceptions are accurate or not, they provide the foundation for further exploration of these serial nations.

White expands his argument by addressing the group of texts that he believes provides a foundation for an increased understanding of serial nations. White labels this genre “imperiography” and point to its rise in the 1720s, 30s, and 40s and then its full blossoming in the 1750s and 60s (69-70). According to White, imperiography presented a specific model of empire that “amounted to an encyclopedia of ethnographies in an unbound seriality that would find cohesion in the imperial framework” (71). That is, the works of imperiography present surveys of the peoples, communities, and institutions that exist in and around the Atlantic world (particularly in North America), and, as a genre, depict the unbound seriality from which nationalism rises. By understanding these serial nations and parallel communities, imperiography then goes on to suggest that this unbound series requires empire for “management, coordination and administration” (71). While each community will continue to function in its own best
interest, only a larger agent can regulate their interrelations. As the eighteenth century progresses, this conception of empire will slowly evolve into the role of the nation, but for the period I will be concerned with in this chapter (roughly 1730-70), the central model is an understanding of how empire exists as a bracket for a group of serial nations. In order to understand this conception of empire, White argues that we must shift our focus deliberately to a different source. He writes that the focus of such inquiry needs to be seen as

Literature about nations (plural), but no literature of the nation (singular). By the middle of the Eighteenth century, the dominant imagined community for creoles became the empire containing the nation. The authors of the imperiographies clearly locate themselves beyond—or better, above—the nation, which still bears the inferiorizing association with the Other. It is less a matter of imagining a (bound) simultaneity with ‘these shops, brides, bishops, and prices,’ and more a matter of imagining the (unbound) seriality of those shops, brides, etc., and those shops brides, etc. and those shops, brides, etc., under the regulation of empire” (71).

As White’s emphasis notes, he places the roots of nationalism less in how the nations within the Atlantic world recognize themselves and more in how they conceptualize the nations that exist simultaneously outside the bound totality of their own nation. With this new conception in mind, a reexamination of the texts circulating throughout the Atlantic demonstrates the role of literature in the construction of this fundamentally new perception of time and space. As I will here argue, poetry plays an important role in establishing the concepts of seriality in the minds of colonists from whose actions nations will take root.
While I will borrow much from White’s argument, my primary departure from his view is with the selection of texts he uses to explicate these conceptions of empire and nation. While White places ethnography and the (later) work of land speculators centrally in the rise of empire and nation respectively, as the poem I opened this chapter with demonstrates, this conception of the relationship between nation and empire has a distinct presence in the poetry of the Atlantic world. I do not disagree that the texts of ethnography play a role, but I believe poetry plays an integral role by establishing such communities through narratives that operate across deep time, and that these poetic representations predate those of the ethnographers. While White accurately argues that the primary use of the term nation in the eighteenth century is through the description of Native American communities, the Winthrop poem shows the term being deployed in 1675 and being used to describe the English community in New England. While this one example by no means contradicts White’s argument (he pointedly labels his explanation of nation as the “dominant practical association” (64)), it at least suggests the presence of the processes he traces in genres outside of the ethnographies on which he concentrates. Indeed, in a range of poems like Winthrop’s, many of which focus less on a specific interaction between collectives, there is much attention given to understanding how the varied collectives of the Atlantic World (Native populations, non-imperial agencies, and competing imperial powers) influence how the specific subjects of each constituency identify themselves and each other within the framework of empire.

Poetry, through its portrayal of native populations and competing imperial powers, plays a central role in the formation of perceptions of serial nations and unbound collectives. By examining the ways in which poetry presents these unbound polities and the values and categorizations that exist outside of them, I will demonstrate the significant role that these texts
play in the imaginations of subjects within and surrounding the imperial project, and thereby expand White’s model of unbound serialities to more accurately reflect the array of texts that shifted the conceptualization of empire and eventually gave rise to nationalism. My argument will concentrate on poems that portray native peoples and imperial powers and the ways in which these poems present these communities across deep time, that is, not only existing simultaneously within the imperial moment, but as having existed in recessional time. That is, how these communities are thought to have had long histories not wholly unlike those of the European communities. In doing so, I argue that the poetics of liberty can be applied to a specific discussion within the field of Atlantic studies, improving the field’s understanding of the root of nation by reconciling current theories with an archive of texts not yet fully understood. While these histories are fundamentally unknowable and thereby fictionalized in their representations, they demonstrate the power of White’s modeling process (and the “interactive fabric” of deep time (Dimock, 4)) in the imagination of the poets, and the powerful role such conceptualizations play in the foundation of nation. Finally, I will return to my central argument about the poetics of liberty to emphasize how poets use the tropes to forward a specific vision of empire and a subjectivity that itself exists extra-nationally and offers the possibility of binding these serialities. To demonstrate these trends, I will examine a selection of periodical poems before discussing two sustained engagements with such work, “Indian Songs of Peace” and James Ralph’s Zeuma: Or the Love of Liberty. In each poem presented, I will focus on how the poets represent native peoples, competing imperial powers, and the complex web of interrelations that exist between them.

Periodicals from throughout the mid-eighteenth century are littered with countless examples of short and medium length poems, in a variety of genres, that show a committed
interest in tracing and understanding the various nations and peoples surrounding the imperial project. One such work, an account given by Lewis and published in the August 30, 1743 edition of the *Boston Gazette* uses the travels and travails of a British man to catalog the peoples and powers of Central America. Leger, a former cook to then Commander Anson of the British Navy, is reported in the poem’s introduction as having dictated these events in his own voice a few days before his murder in a “fray at an inn.” To outline the poem in brief, it is an account of Leger who, while gathering limes for the ship’s crew, was assayed by natives who turned him over to the Spanish. After torture at the hands of the Spaniards in multiple locations throughout Central America, Leger was eventually placed on a ship from Mexico to Spain, from which he escaped off the shore of Lisbon and was pulled aboard a Portuguese ship that eventually transferred him to a British ship that returned him to America. While Leger ends the account with his desire for revenge on those who hurt him: “(Sweet revenge still burned in my mind) / I long’d to pay my Tyrants in their kind,” the unnamed poet has added an addendum lamenting the pitiable end of Leger: “Ah what is man! Him perils shan’t annoy / Yet, feign’d security at once destroy / Hard! After hazarding my Life, / To fall at home, ignobly, by a knife.”

The poetic account of Leger’s life is of note for the ways in which it fits clearly into White’s imperiography, giving brief accounts of a swath of peoples around the imperial project, but still displaying a nuanced understanding of the agents and nations circulating throughout the region. The account of each collective encountered is brief, but the cataloguing of these peoples would have sparked the imagination of those reading the poem. Appended to these descriptions is a careful record of the places that Leger was taken, letting the poem’s readership map out

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37 Anson would go on to serve as the First Lord of the Admiralty from 1751-1756.
38 As with many narratives of the period, the poet here employs a historic frame to add authority and authenticity to the work.
39 It would appear that the conceit of the poem’s construction is already failing at the poem’s end, as the first-person narration is sustained despite the events having been reported prior to the murder.
events geographically and ethnographically. First making land in Central America, “Past various Climes, behold Guatulco’s coast,” Leger is attacked by natives of the region: “Lo! Frighted Indians rise around / At me, now stretch’d on Earth, their arrows fly / Stick in my vest, or whiz quite harmless by” (Leger). It would appear that his own shouting scared the Indians into action, and though they are quick to violence, Leger is not long held by these natives who instead hand him over to the Spanish in the region, with whom the true savagery in the region resides:

Now Forc’d to Acapulco, sad distress’d
What different Passions struggled in my Breast!
Imprison’d, pillory’d, by Barbarians rude,
My drink was water, soap my only food. (Leger)

While these descriptions are quite brief, they are sufficient to set up the region’s conflicts, filling in the map of the region and fitting neatly into the ongoing imperial narrative of the brutality of the Spanish and their iron rule over the people and lands of Central America. Although the natives use primitive weapons, there is no real account of Leger having suffered at their hands. Yet the Spanish impinge upon Leger’s liberty and force him to eat only soap.  

This contrast between the savage natives and the even greater depravity of the Spanish is a frequent construction of these imperiographic poem, as they work within the poetics of liberty to support their more correct (British) model of empire.

The poem next provides a longer account of the temptations the Spanish offer for Leger to defect to their forces and convert to their faith. Leger reports suffering beatings at the hands of Spanish slaves because of his refusal to convert: “From Dungeons dragg’d, where negroes me abus’d, / ‘Cause I t’illume the Crucifix refus’d.” Although the exact temptations offered by the

40 It should be noted that the Poet gives the following footnote to this line: “Lewis Leger affirm’d (the Truth of which some may scruple) that the Spaniards gave him nothing but Soap (Half a pound a day) to eat; which being too nauseous, he used to get it sold, and then purchased some poor provisions with the Money.”
Spanish are left unclear, Leger avows that under this distress he remains steadfastly aligned with his own empire: “Still true to Britain, I its cause maintain, / Spite of the Threats and Promises of Spain.” The heroism Leger shows is one tied to faith and nation, as he withstands temptation in line with the common British trope. As recounted above, Leger is taken from Acapulco to Mexico, and finally Vera-Cruz, from which he sets sail aboard a Spanish vessel for Europe all while still being tempted away from British service: “Now my Tyrants with good Words allure / And, bribing, would my services Secure.” Yet, Leger slips away near Tagus, and eventually returns to America aboard a British ship.

These characterizations forward a specific vision of the peoples of the Atlantic with whom Leger interacts and demonstrate the interworkings of their relationships. The Spanish, both violent and seductive, provide a stark contrast to the freedom and liberty of the British. Anson and his crew are presented as powerful, inquisitive and pious, and the Spanish are the darkest group encountered, being the source of much torment for the sailor. By contrast, when the Portuguese are encountered late in the poem, Leger is “kindly shelter’d” and returned to his own people, demonstrating that not every competing European power is malevolent. While the superiority of the British is always maintained (The poet likens the contrast of the Spanish to the British as “Like Woodcocks, doom’d the Royal Eagles prey”), the Spanish are presented as holding power over both native and negro populations. While the novelty of the poem clearly lies in the travails of Leger, the narrative is clearly built around an impulse to understand the peoples with whom the readership shares North America in a manner much akin to the imperiography White describes, suggesting that the poet and audience had a vested interest in mapping out these communities and their interrelations.

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41 Leger is captured by natives while seeking limes for a punch meant to celebrate St. George’s Day.
As the eighteenth century continued, and relations between North American (particularly New England) colonists, natives and the French became more hostile, the representations of the natives likewise shifted, but still demonstrate the important role of the modeling process in the attempts of each to understand the others. In 1762, a broadside published in Boston, “The Four Indian Kings,” offered an account of Indian kings who travel to England in order to report on the atrocities inflicted upon their people at the hands of the French. Despite the complex and far-reaching geopolitical context, the poem is more centrally focused on a chance encounter and an entreaty of the youngest Indian king for the hand of a woman he encounters while strolling in St. James Park. The poem opens with the events that provide the frame for the encounter in the park:

LISTEN to a true Relation,

Of Four Indian Kings of late,

Who came to this Christian nation,

To report their sorrows great;

Which by the French they have sustained,

To the overthrow of trade;

That the same might be regained,

They have come to beg our aid.

Having told their sad condition

To our good and gracious queen,

With all low and humble submission,

Mixed with a courteous mien:

Lovingly they were received,

In Great Britain’s loyal court:
Many lords and ladies grieved,
At these Indian kings report. (The Four Indian Kings)

This opening is of note for two reasons. First, the poet only briefly rehearses the context for the visit of the Indian kings. The brevity of his recounting of the conflict between the French and the Indians, as well as the role that Britain plays is clearly indicative of how well known the specifics of the conflict would be to the audience. Despite the relative complexity of the relationships at the heart of the conflict, the poet can keep the description brief and direct, referring to atrocities and disruption. But perhaps most importantly, the poem seems to endorse the idea that the British empire is the effective arbiter of conflicts between these smaller constituent collectives. Described here as an appeal to aid, it is clear that the Natives seek the intervention of the British to regulate the interaction of the French and themselves, notably, in regards to “the overthrow of trade” that has caused the suffering of the peoples. Here empire, as the larger power, would be able to align and situate the smaller constituents.

Throughout the rest of the poem, made up mostly of the youngest king’s appeal to a British woman, the characterization of the king presented is based in the processes of modeling, or the “analogy and translation,” that White describes. Indeed, simply labeling these Indian men as kings translates a title and governing structure onto the Indian peoples that, while of questionable accuracy, makes for easier understanding in the eyes of the audience. As the poem progresses, the choice to present the appeal of the king towards the lady in verse advances this modeling process and Anglicizes the king further. Whether intentional, or more likely not, the effect is to present a king that is not at all exotic, but is, in essence, an Englishman. This is clear in the opening of the king’s appeal which, while still marked with the language of difference (nation, Christian), makes an emotional connection that erases the differences:
Like a broken hearted lover,
Of the smote his wounded breast,
Breathing forth his lamentation:
Oh what pains I do endure;
The young ladies of this nation,
They are more than mortals sure.
In his language he related,
How her angel beauty bright,
His great heart had captivated,
E’re since she appeared in sight:
Tho’ there’s thousands tall and pretty,
Youthful, proper strait and tall,
In this noble Christian city;
Yet she far exceeds them all. (The Four Indian Kings)

The central focus of the poem is clearly the emotional reaction the king has at the sight of the young woman, her beauty being described as angelic and seemingly superhuman, if not divine. If Anderson’s model relies on an understanding of the wants and desires found within communities foreign to that of the reader (in newspapers or in novels), then this account clearly demonstrates one version of this. That is, we see a representation of characters who exist within a page (and historical frame) occupying the same space and time, but separate from the reader. The king in these moments is less of an other and more of a sympathetic character that would be familiar to the audience, that of the love struck gentleman. While the poem still notes that he speaks through his own language and is being translated, the eloquent tone of his appeal in verse undoubtedly
bleeds into the audience’s understanding of the character. There is no sense that he is of a lesser or more savage community, he is a part of a more familiar and universal category.

As his appeal goes on, the king himself references how this emotional connection seems to erase the distinctions that are otherwise important. That is, shared humanity gives them a connection and understanding that matters more than political separations. The king first explains away his rank: “Pray her that it may be spoken / She destroyed an Indian King / Who is able to defend her / In his rich America,” and then appeals to her Christianity:

Tell her ‘Tis within her power
At this time to kill or cure
Tell her that you see me ready
to expire for her sake,
As she is a Christian lady,
Sure she will some pity take. (The Four Indian Kings)

While I cannot claim to explain all the reactions the readership might have to this, I would argue that amongst them would clearly be a recognition of the humanity of this figure, and of the fact that despite coming from a wholly different world experience, his own emotions and actions fit with known patterns. Whether this is extended into broader empathy would surely depend on the reader. While clearly evoked for the sake of drama, such a move fits within notions of seriality. Empire has allowed these members of wholly different communities to encounter each other, and yet the sum of their personal experiences is not all that different. Here, in this metropolitan scene, there must be further imperial arbitration to ensure the proper regulation of social order and insurance of social status. While there is certainly a high level of fictionalization occurring,
the fact that this is how such encounters are presented to the popular imagination fits into the theories of both Anderson and White.

This interest in understanding the serial nations that surround the colonies remains of interest throughout the Atlantic world as the revolution approaches. Many poets working in the colonies, where such knowledge might have more practical implications, present interpretations of native and imperial populations that show an abiding curiosity in both the serial nations of the contemporary moment and those that the imperial project has already either subsumed or, in many cases, eradicated. That is, understanding the serial collectives required an understanding of the larger course of history of the Americas. This leads to a large body of poetry on the history of the natives in Mexico and Peru, published and circulated in periodicals (and thereby often equated with news) and also in broadsides and books. One such example, a 1767 untitled poem published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, demonstrates how the term nation is deployed widely in a manner akin to that of White’s ethnographies: “Struck with his bleeding people’s woes, / Old India’s awful genius rose / He sat on Andes’ topmost stone, / and heard a thousand nations groan.” Here nation functions much like modern readers would use tribe, and the suffering depicted further vilifies the Spanish and their lust for gold that leads to great barbarism upon the natives. These efforts to construct historical narratives that serve the political and imperial project continue even as the political reality of the situation of the colonies begins to shift.

During and after the American Revolution, the efforts to understand serial nations expand into a larger effort, in verse just as much as in ethnographies, to present a complete history of North America. Poets, in doing so, offer a variety of portrayals of the natives that predate the colonies, using a mixture of historical fact and fictionalization, although the boundary between the two is rather unclear. Curiously, most of these depictions pin their description on the
longevity of these peoples’ habitation, using the symbol of the natural home to represent something less temporary and with deeper roots. One such example, in these lines from the 1782 poem “Sketches of American History,” shows many of the assumptions made about the pre-colonial state of the natives:

These Indians, ’tis certain were here long before ye all
And dwelt in their wigwams from time immemoral?
In a meer state of nature, untutor’d untaught
They did as they pleased and spoke as they thought.

No priests they had then for the cure of their souls
No lawyers recorders, nor keeper of rolls
No learned physicians vile nostrums conceal’d—
Their druggists were nature—her ship was the field

The description emphasizes the deep history of the people (much time, even if left empty), a people that seems to have existed outside of time without any sort of record keeper. These gestures demonstrate an understanding of the tribes longevity, but also a depreciation of the worth of such time without the types of knowledge that empire (and wider Enlightenment science) can provide. Beyond this, even in these passages that show the contrast between the natives and the Europeans, there is the implication of shared experience. That is, while these differences highlight a different community, it is one with familiar needs, wants and desires. Thus the alien/foreign is made relatable through analogy and translation.

While these short verses work to remind us of the poems circulating in periodicals that would have made up part of the daily experiences of the colonists and later the early national
citizens, I would like to continue by examining some examples of the longer poems that show a more sustained imagining of the native communities and a more realized society rendered in deep time. As I will demonstrate, these longer poems expand the gestures traced here and more widely use the poetics of liberty to inform imperiographic designs.

One such example of a sustained imagining of the natives shows a commitment to representing the culture and lore of these collectives. In 1752, the printers Parker and Wayman introduced a book of “Indian Songs of Peace” to the public which offers a unique perspective on their deep time characterizations. The book, envisioned as a response or supplement to Caldwell’s Colden’s *History of the Five Indian Nations*, reports to transcribe two poems of native origin. The book, which features a lengthy introduction arguing for the veracity of its origins and the necessity of funding for Indian public schools, demonstrates a desire to move beyond the history of the Indian nations and begin to understand the culture and society that they have built. The book identifies its author as “The author of the American Fables,” while the two poems are ascribed to Maratho and Yariza, a native man and woman who share the history and mythology of their people in the poem. While the introduction assures the audience that these are authentic Indian songs, the best evidence it can offer is the use of many words and phrases that Colden attributes to the tribes within his ethnography.

The poems themselves are occasioned by the planting of a “Tree of Peace” that is meant to symbolize the end of war between themselves and the Indian nations gathered. The poetry, purportedly composed by natives, is presented here with “embellishment” by a translator. While these poems were almost certainly composed entirely by an English poet, such gestures, like those seen in narratives of the period, grant authority to the accounts presented. However, what is of more concern to their role in imperiography are the ways in which they present a wholly

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42 White focuses his introduction of imperiography on this work by Colden (64).
realized society with its own rituals, beliefs, and history. Beyond this, the whole conceit of the collection is that the nation had developed its own literature, a literature separate from European traditions, but similarly capable of expression and beauty. The “Songs of Peace” present a unified vision of a culture that is wholly separate from that of the colonists, but is recognizable, indeed equivalent, to the colonists in many respects. Beyond this, the poem also continues to place empire above these nations, making clear that only empire can bring structure to these relations and find benefit for all these serialities.

The poem opens with an account of the ritual being performed and the hope for peace that is going to overpower the lust for war and violence that has long dominated the nations assembled:

Now the joyful Morning shone,
Bright as e’er was Morning known;
When the Indian Nations met,
The Tree of Peace to set.

As the Tribes, there, all prepar’d,
The Solemnity regard;
From amidst th’ attentive Throng
Maratho began the song.

Plant and bless the sacred Tree,
Prosp’rous may its Shadow be!
Fast lay hold of Earth its Roots!
Be the Fruits of Peace its Fruits!

Lofty let its Top arise,
And be favour’d by the Skies!
Spirits good, from High who view,
Water it with heav’ny Dew!

The poem, in following Colden’s example, is representing both Indian nations and the lesser tribes that make up each, showing a hierarchy into which empire can easily be entered as the new top tier. In displaying the ritual and sacrament that the Tree represents, the poet depicts a culture not wholly unlike that of the book’s audience. That is, his readership, while unfamiliar with the specific ritual, is aware that this is a people with songs, prayers, and sacred writs not all that different from their own. Outside of the reference to “spirits,” this could easily be a Christian prayer for peace and prosperity. Thus, the Indian nations are presented as analogous in structure to the audience’s own community.

The introduction to the volume also participates directly in extending the readership’s understanding of native communities and, in doing so, reinforces the native peoples standing as a serial nation with deep history. Laying out the case for the poetry’s authenticity, the author writes, “These Songs or Odes, call them which you please, by their Air and Accent, appear of Indian Extraction. They abound with their Phraseology. The Tree, The Chain, the House of Peace, the great Sachem for the King, the great Lake for the Ocean, Carlaer for the Governor of the province, Manhaten for New-York, you very well know the terms in use” (4). Through these gestures the author works to establish his own credibility but is also reinforcing the nature of serial nations for the audience (although the authenticity is suspect). Though these communities
lack a shared language or culture, they are still concerned with the same places, ideas, and institutions. By fitting this work onto Colden’s, the argument becomes that these peoples too hold art, creativity, and genius that deserves the same cultivation and growth as the genius of England.

Beyond these analogous structures, the poem would have us believe that the assembled Indian nations are seeking the type of structure and aid that the British Empire can provide. Midway through Maratho’s song, the native turns his attention to the British directly in a passage that is soaked in the imagery of empire. In the following passage, the Native singer praises King George and establishes the King as a true guardian of peace:

The high sachem, at the Helm
Of the pow’rful British Realm,
GEORGE, who’s great on Lands and Seas,
Indians, is a Friend to Pace:

Deeds of War, in his esteem,
Which to others pompous seem,
Are not great, but as they tend
In a happy Peace to end.

He has set a Tree of Peace,
Th’ Earth, and the great Lake to grace;
May the Nations love its shade!
And its Verdure never fade! (15-16)
While the veracity of the poem strains credulity in such passages, the poem’s authenticity is second to the effect it has in conceptualizing the imperial framework in the minds of its audience. In fact, the Native is reversing the modeling process, denoting King George as “The high sachem,” translating his culture’s structures onto the English. While it seems highly unlikely that the Indian nations would gather to sing praise to King George, what matters is that the audience would understand that the nations, like the colonists themselves fall within the realm of the King and will easily fit into the grand vision of empire. In the second song of the book, Yariza also echoes these sentiments, reserving her final blessing not for peace amongst her own people, but for the British: “And thy British servant bless / Yet with years of happy Peace / And the Britons of all Lands, / Where so e’er that people stands” (22). Although both speakers will still hold the Indian nations as separate, it is clear that the poem means to yoke the fates of these serial nations and it presents empire as the means through which all can find coordination and contentment.

The introduction of the poem also embraces empire as the means of regulating and cultivating these relationships as its primary goal is to argue for funding for native schools through which the creativity shown in these verses may be nurtured into fruition. In the most direct appeal to the audience, the author quotes heavily from Colden and constructs a specific case that reflects the web of relations that link these serial nations in an imperial network:

In another place [Colden] says that ‘if Care was taken to plant in them, and cultivate that general Benevolence to Mankind, which is the true Principle of Virtue,—they would no longer deserve the Name of Barbarians, but would become a People whose Friendship might add Honour to the British Nation.”
What pity is it that such a genius should be sunk or depraved, which, if it was reliev’d and rightly cultivated, might shine out to them, and to us, with Advantage and with Honour.

Would not such cultivating of it, tend to the Good of the Publick, not only of this Province and those Nations, but promote the British, --the Christian Interest? (5)

Noting the national, religious, and moral reasons for cultivating learning within the natives, the author demonstrates an understanding of how empire, through regulation and moderation, can organize these separate nations and foster resources for the benefit of all the constituent nations, an appeal built from the foundation of *translatio studii* here made specific through imperial translation. This demonstrates the historical reality of White’s imperiography but also shows the next logical extension of it, as subjects within the imperial system recognize the potential of empire to subsume these serial nations and provide order to all, and begin to envision how secular and sacred institutions will fit into the bound totality of empire.

Finally, it should be noted that the poet of the “Indian Songs of Peace” is not just forwarding an argument for empire, but is specifically arguing for the suitability of the British Empire to regulate these constituent entities by utilizing the tropes of the poetics of liberty. As I have argued, it is through the value of liberty that poets throughout the Atlantic distinguish the British Empire from the empires of antiquity, and, in particular, the violent and greedy empire of Spain. Yariza invokes liberty in her song, praying that the fruit of the tree of peace “never satiate” and be “ever dear, /…/As is Light, or Liberty” (19). Liberty to Yariza is the fruit of peace and will itself, if spread throughout the lands, prevent further war (and thereby savagery and cruelty). This definition aligns closely with that of Milton, envisioning liberty as the pathway
of learning and goodness. The introduction to the poem is even more direct in its call to liberty, as it invokes the value verbosely in another direct appeal for the cultivation of the native genius:

Then, — that Love of Liberty and Honour; — that Roman, — that British Spirit: —
They seem naturally akin to us, — beside our Alliance, — let us help our Brethren.
If the rough Gem throws out some Sparks of Light, how will it shine when polish’d! If the Tree appears fair in the Verdure of its Leaves, will not the Blossoms and Fruits make it look more lovely! (11).

The nations are never expressed as being as close as the phrasing here, particularly “Brethren,” which itself represents a sibling relationship between nations beneath the parent empire. While the metaphors seem uncouth to modern tastes, the poet invokes these rites with particular emphasis, believing unwaveringly that liberty gives the empire the right to subsume these nations, and that only empire can smooth relations and help all nations flourish. This is an argument that will repeatedly arise in many depictions of serial nations throughout the century.

Zeuma: or the Love of Liberty by James Ralph fits easily into the genre of imperiography, but notably, arises much earlier than any of the examples yet discussed. Originally published in London in 1729, this places the poem amongst the earliest ethnographic examples of imperiography that White identifies, dating it closely with the first volume of Colden’s History of the Five Nations. The poem, a three-book epic chronicling the Homeric struggle of native Peruvians fighting the invading Spanish, depicts the natives in rich detail that includes gestures towards a deep history of the tribe. In both its characterization of the natives and of the Spanish, the poem demonstrates the vital role that the English can play in structuring the realm without
the English ever once appearing. Yet, as the title suggests, liberty plays a central role in the conflict that unfolds.

Ralph, a native of New Jersey and friend of Benjamin Franklin, composed the poem in order to pay tribute to liberty and to reassert its greatness in an age in which he felt its influence had waned (Preface, v). Himself a figure of the Atlantic world, Ralph composed the poem while living in England, having abandoned a wife and child in order to pursue a literary career with Franklin in England. Although the two friends would part ways due to a disagreement over Ralph’s mistress and some unpaid loans, in his autobiography, Franklin praised Ralph and his abilities effusively, writing: “Ralph was ingenious, genteel in his manners, and extremely eloquent. I think I never knew a prettier talker” (37). Franklin also describes attempts to dissuade Ralph from pursuing poetry, yet admits that he was unable to convince Ralph. Ralph would publish multiple long poems in England before being described in Pope’s “Dunciad” poorly, an event that caused Ralph to give up his poetic pursuits. Yet, as an active member of both North American and English publishing, Ralph was well known. While the text of Zeuma may not be of high artistic value, the work the poem does in establishing serial nations of both natives and the Spanish cannot be discounted, as the poem circulated and went through multiple editions on both sides of the Atlantic.

Zeuma: or the Love of Liberty is set at the height of the Spanish conquest of South America as the invaders set their sights on the Indian nations of Peru. There, Zeuma, a Native King and the poem’s primary protagonist, is warned by divine forces to prepare his people for war. In Book I, Zeuma prepares his people for war, but is then defeated and must beat a hasty retreat to the capital of his nation. Upon arriving there, he learns that Zirene, his betrothed bride, having been sent from a neighboring nation in search of aid, was captured by the Spanish and is
being held. In the second book, a daring rescue is staged by Zeuma’s friend Ogdar, who rescues Zirene but is killed in his return to Zeuma. The hero’s joy at being reunited with his bride is short lived as the Spanish send word that, in return for the safe return of Zirene to their camp, they will leave the nation in peace. While Zeuma feels compelled to give in to the demand, his people demand that he does not, and the couple is married. In the third and final book, Zeuma prepares for battle and is given a vision of what awaits kings and tyrants in the afterlife. Having his faith in liberty and valor reaffirmed by the vision, Zeuma faces the Spanish bravely, though he is eventually met with defeat and death as the Spanish army overtakes the city and its people.

In the preface to the poem, Ralph is defensive about his decision to portray the conflict between the natives and the Spaniards, asserting that this story belongs alongside the greatest epics of antiquity: “‘tis to be presum’d that an Indian history may prove as effectual to fix the reader’s attention as any other; to awaken, and confirm his Love of Liberty, even better, when ‘tis consider’d that those whom we esteem Savages could die in its defense; to entertain, and divert by the novelty of its scenes;”(V). In this brief defense, Ralph asserts that while there are significant differences between subject and reader, that the shared love of liberty overwhelms national and cultural distinctions. The poem’s actual reception is hard to trace, but most accounts of it focus on how imitative it is of aspects of Milton and Spenser. Samuel Kettle, who chose to include the poem in his 1829 Specimens of American Poetry anthology, wrote of the poem, “The story has little merit on the score of invention, and is executed in a style sufficiently negligent.” Comments such as this explain why the poem has not been studied more widely, but I will contend that despite its clear aesthetic deficiencies, and its many derivative devices, the poem does significant work through its portrayal of the relations between these nations, and the deep
history each faction has. By presenting this narrative as a historical account, Ralph creates a nation of people with their own rich history that stretches back into deep time.

The poem itself, while primarily speaking to events long past, is intensely engaged in the political moment of 1729. While the primary conflict is between the Spanish conquistadors and the native Peruvians, the presence of the British Empire is felt throughout the poem. In fact, the central conflict between greed and liberty is itself an argument for the righteousness of the British Empire (which preserves the liberty of the nations it subsumes) over the ruthlessness and greed of the Spanish Empire (that can only oppress). The poem’s opening sets the action to follow in the context of not the natives, but of contemporary views of the Spanish:

Tis hard for man, bewilder’d in a maze
Of doubtful reas’nings to assign the cause
By Heav’ns all-ruling pow’r, supremely just
And good, should give Iberia’s cruel sons
Unbounded leave to travel o’er the globe,
And search remotest climes; to stretch their sway
Thro all the western world; to exile Peace
And Liberty, with all their train of joys
From the afflicted lands; and proudly vex
Th’unhappy nations with oppressive rule. (1-2)

Spain, as the enemy of peace and liberty, is consistently depicted in terms such as these (cruel and unbounded), which focus on the dark barbarism and savagery they inflict upon the natives. In many ways, this reverses common tropes that differentiate native from European through
violence and savagery. This trend is extended almost immediately when a divine visitor grants Zeuma a vision of the Spanish at war in other lands:

Again

the monarch starts, astonish’d at the noise,
While, down their steepy sides, descend a throng
Of bearded men, of foreign look and mien;
That brighten o’er the plain with shining arms,
And all the pomp of war. To them succeeds
An herd of creatures, fierce and active, train’d
To battle, and the din of arms; on which
The Warriors mounting, all proceed, in firm
And regular array, across the field;
When sound a charge; and o’er the tranquil globe
Let loose destruction, and with slaughter glut
The sword; with dire, oppressive force and stern
Dominion fix their barb’rous rule43 (13-14)

The Spanish are of much lower character than the natives, and it is to them that the poet gives the labels of savagery and violence. Whereas Zeuma is given the label monarch (its use an analogy at best) the language connected to the Spanish is much more bestial and violent: “cruel,” “oppressive,” “foreign,” and “fierce.” Here and elsewhere “barb’rous” is almost exclusively reserved for the Spanish. The effect is to note that, again, while empire can bind nations, this power can be exploited for greed and power. The effective reversal that demonizes the Spanish

43 Here and elsewhere, Zeuma is visited by a heavenly angel that, while not explicitly labeled as Christian, is presented in a manner quite like the angels that visit Adam throughout Paradise Lost.
also has the effect of drawing the natives closer to the British, and clearly establishing the peoples as serial nations.

As the Spanish are demonized, Zeuma in contrast is Anglicized in both his demeanor and his leadership. While much of the poem resembles a Homeric epic of conflict, complete with councils and embassies, the nature of Zeuma’s leadership is much different from the heroism of antiquity. After receiving the previously mentioned “Mission from above” (15), Zeuma returns to his people and directs his chiefs, “the sage in councils and the Great in arms” (16) to prepare for the enemy that he has seen.

the hoary head

Essay’d the means of peace, inspir’d the youth
With warlike ardour, and heroic warmth,
Inur’d their manly limbs with toil,
And, by example, taught them to subdue
Their passions, and forget the love of ease (16)

Zeuma’s role as leader is to inspire and fire the passions in each, not to be the strongest champion on the field. He is much more Odysseus than Achilles. The monarch instructs his people on the contents of his vision and trains each to be ready for Spain’s dreadful war machines. As the poem unfolds, Zeuma’s greatest acts of heroism are in his eagerness to put aside his own desires in favor of those of his people. Late in the second book, when offered peace in exchange for Zirene, Zeuma is more than willing to sacrifice his happiness to secure his people’s freedom: “But shall a King neglect the Publick good, / Committed to his Charge, to serve his own? / Forbid it Heav’n, and all ye juster Pow’rs!” (81-2). This selflessness stands in
stark opposition to the Spanish greed, but also fits easily into the Christian values of sacrifice and humility that inform British liberty.

The farthest extension of the poet’s seeming inversion of tropes of civilization and savagery is featured in the divine imagery that seems to link the religion of the natives with the Christianity of Europe. Throughout the poem the natives are directly and indirectly aided by forces always linked to heaven, powers from above, and angelic figures. After first receiving instruction from an “illusive prophet” disguised as a hermit, Zeuma is granted his “Mission from above” (15) to prepare his people for war. This scene is swiftly followed by an embassy from the Spanish which demands the treasure and crown of the kingdom because they are “As sent of Heav’n, and favour’d by the Gods” (18). This subtle inversion suggests that the natives are aligned with a single (seemingly, though never directly labeled Christian) God, while the Spanish are tied to a pantheon. All of this, while varying in effect, is concerned with depicting the relationship between these nations in every way, and always with the specter of the British, brought to the poem by the readers.

In the second book, when in need of great council, Zeuma is again visited by a heavenly messenger who appears to him within the capital city. On this occasion the guardian appears not as a hermit but with the raiment of traditional Christian angels:

Musick, from on high,

    Sweet warbling thro’ the dome, resounded soft,

    And dy’d upon the Ear; while sudden Day,

    In all its glory, darted thro’ the gloom

    And spread it’s golden radiance all around:

    At once he saw unmov’d the wond’rous blaze,
And (far beyond his Hope) an heav’nly Form,
Commission’d from above, to speak Content
To his distracted Thoughts, and lull his cares
In Peace; for this intent, the angelick Pow’r
Ad sweetened all his visage into smiles,
And ev’ry glance was wing’d with Love he breath’s
Compassion for the sons of Men, and seem’d
Created for their Good (53-4).

The figure (named in the poem’s argument as a “guardian angel”), greatly resembles, in appearance and demeanor, the angels that visit Adam throughout *Paradise Lost* and give him comfort. Tying this figure to sources of wealth, light, and joy assures the audience that the power of heaven is here aligned with Zeuma, and by extension liberty (or perhaps the reverse). While the previous examples explored in this chapter have shown cases where the native religion and pantheon are maintained within the poem, what Ralph has done is further characterized these Indian nations as analogous to those of England in the eyes of heaven and the audience through the image of Milton’s Adam—the progenitor of the entire species, and thereby a shared ancestor. The angel girds Zeuma’s resolve and prepares him for the further conflict that will come, and in doing so, further demonstrates that some values and institutions, or perhaps in this case beliefs, exist outside of the familiar bound totalities and can unite disparate peoples across vast gaps of time and space.

These connections are affirmed and extended as the third book opens and Zeuma is visited by the ghosts of his forefathers who convince the wavering hero to leave his marriage bed and return to the cause of his people. The scene, familiar to epic poetry and reworking the key
tension of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, presents the underworld that awaits both heroes and tyrants after death. Zeuma’s father presents the underworld for tyrants in order to rid his son of greedy selfish temptations. Without question, the underworld presented bears little resemblance to that of the classical epics and is much more in line with a Christian hell:

Far in the deep

Dire Centre of the hollow Globe, there flames
A burning Ocean, with eternal rage,
And fires the baleful shores around; oft, rouz’d
To tenfold fury, threatens the gloomy arch
Above, and rocks the frighted World; while floods
Of boiling sulphur, working wide, ascend
Thro’ ev’ry winding cave (102-103)

While the description goes on at some length, this small sampling makes the point. The divine powers of the Indian nation fit easily into the Christian worldview and systems of morality. While it’s easy to write this off as mere propaganda, Ralph is actually making a major statement with these sections. According to standard Christian doctrine, including that presented in *Paradise Lost*, all pagans would be condemned to hell by virtue of not believing in Christ. Yet Ralph is constructing a morality system within his poem that discounts actual Christian belief in favor of morality and practices of liberty. Given the nature of his portrayal of the Spanish, this means that the heroic natives can find salvation before the actual Christians (albeit sinful Christians) of the poem.

One of the most compelling aspects of Ralph’s depiction of the native Peruvians, beyond the ways in which he Anglicizes them, is the fact that the nation depicted is represented as
having a long and detailed history that has shaped their laws, beliefs, customs, and leadership. While White argues that the ethnographers’ attempts to historicize and catalogue the natives of North America help establish the nature of the serial communities, I would contend that this is further enhanced by efforts such as those displayed in Ralph that establish that these serialities have existed across deep time and share their own layered history. In the case of Ralph, it is clear to see that much of this history is analogous to the history of the European powers, borrowing much from classical and religious accounts to represent a large-scale expansion of the modeling process at the center of White’s argument. In so doing, Ralph adds authenticity and depth to the notions of serial nations in the imagination of his readership. In other words, “those shops, brides, etc.” exist with a rich history that has existed across deep time, and that contains a familiar topography.

Two specific moments in the poem, where the poet departs from the account of the conflict and explains a setting and the role it has played in this society’s history, demonstrate how the community is rendered in deep time. In both cases, the passage allows Ralph to set up a contrast between the people at war and at peace, but in two very different manners. The first, in the first book, establishes the field of battle by describing the history of the field itself:

In happier days, when Peace and Plenty pour’d
Their blessings on the globe, these blissful fields
Had been the haunt of innocence and Joy:
Here, each returning Spring, th’assembling tribes,
With rural pleasures crown’d the day and breath’d
The fragrance of the evening breeze; here, tun’d
Their sweetest songs, and in the moonlight shades
Indulg’d the am’rous tale; the purple morn
Return’d but to renew their happiness
And each gay minute flew along surcharg’d
With new delights; while Sorrow, Care, and Pain
At distanced howl’d, nor with unhallowed tread
E’er ventur’d to molest the gladsome Round. (22-3)

In this simple description of how the nation enjoyed its surroundings and customs during peacetime, Ralph draws on multiple sources to help establish the community outside of the immediate events that he relates. By presenting the peacetime activities amidst his ongoing depiction of the war and violence, Ralph evokes Homer’s extended ekphrasis on the engraving of Achilles’s shield in *The Iliad*. As in Homer, the contrast between war and peace is made clear.

Secondly, the gesture seems to present a past golden age from which the culture has now fallen. Here the people enjoy an Edenic setting and live contently off the land, despite the primitive nature of their civilization. These simple pleasures of rural life were satisfying to the people of Peru until their minds were turned towards war and the invasion. Yet even before the Spanish arrived, the people in general, and Zeuma in particular, seem to have grown restless and not find the same enjoyment in these simple pleasures. Both of these gestures seem to evoke a deeper history to a people that would undoubtedly have the audience drawing parallels to the specter of the golden age found through many of the poems of the classical world (particularly epic and pastoral). Thus fictional history and generic conventions are employed to present a more fully realized civilization.
Yet it is not true that the past of Zeuma’s tribe has been entirely peaceful. In the opening of the second book, as Zeuma takes shelter within a temple just outside the capital city, Ralph offers a very detailed account of how the nation, under Zeuma’s leadership, has changed their rituals and religion as they have developed their culture. The passage, which seems to be wholly an invention of the poet, creates a detailed and rich history:

Near to the City walls, and on the verge
Of an adjoining wood, the thickest boughs
Wide-shadowing, stood an ancient Structure fam’d
For all the beauties of the Builder’s art;
But envious Time, and unrelenting Age,
With slow decay, had worn the mould’ring arch,
And shook the sculptured Column to its Base:
[...]
Here were the Gods ador’d with cruel rites,
And kneeling Kings, with human blood, aton’d
The errors of their Rule: each altar long
Had been defil’d with such flagitious deeds,
And thousands of unhappy Men were made
The sacrifice of Hell; the pillars glow’d
With living Crimson, and the floor was heap’d
With strange variety of Bones; aloft
The Sculls of mighty enemies were hung
Barb’rous Triumph; and grim Death appear’d
The Genius of the Place (49-50)

This passage is notable because of its detail and the violence of its descriptions. Here, in a passage wholly about a native temple, we see imagery that has been more closely associated with the Spanish thus far in the poem. Note that here “barb’rous” is applied to the natives, and their own depravity is alluded to through the blood, bones, and skulls of their victims. Yet, the description fits many contemporary ideas of what the heathen tribes performed in their rituals prior to the Spanish incursion. Indeed, this passage seems to contradict much of what has preceded it, as these rituals betray a pantheistic belief system based on violent sacrifice. The passage goes on in even more gorey detail to discuss the dark rituals performed here.

Lest the reader begin to doubt Zeuma’s nature and his worthiness to rise as a champion of liberty, the poet explains that it was actually Zeuma who ended these dark rituals and banned the suffering and brutality they inflicted upon those being sacrificed:

E’er Zeuma rose to empire; forbid the dire
Rejoycings o’er a vanquished Foe, and taught
The barb’rous Priest a Worship more Divine:
From that blest Period the devoted walls
No longer blush’d with human Blood; the bones
Of offer’d Victims were remov’d, and death,
With all his terrors, dar’d no more approach
The service of the Gods: religious Dread
Alone remain’d to wake the heedless Wretch
From sublunary Bliss, and fix his thought
On Virtue, and the true delight it gives.
Thus changed the venerable Pile became
A scene of Pleasure to the studious Soul,
Who, rapt in Contemplation, here forgot
The cares of Life, and, with increasing warmth
Convers’d with Heav’n, and breath’d celestial Joy. (51-52)

What Ralph has created here is a rich history of a society’s evolution away from pagan
hedonistic worship and towards a more recognizable form of worship based in thoughtful
contemplation and prayer. This evolution not only traces how the community has changed over
time, but it also credits Zeuma directly, linking him in that moment to empire, as if he deploys
liberty throughout the Indian nations as the British do around the Atlantic (another tiered
hierarchy). Whereas many other poems and ethnographies concern themselves merely with the
current practices of a community, Ralph has given his Peruvians an invented history in which
they have renounced violent sacrifice under the guidance of their kindly king. Beyond
establishing the roots and history of this nation, the decision also works to present them as being
more evolved and cultivated than the barbaric Spanish who have yet to renounce such violent
acts.

In both the golden age and the religious conversion presented, the readers of the poem
would likely see the history of Europe as much as that of the New World. That is, by extending
his modeling process, Ralph presents a nation that, while clearly not as far along the path to
civility, is treading through the same historical processes that the Europeans know from their
own history. This type of grand history is in every way as important as the less complex temporal
and spatial relationships presented in newspapers and ethnographies. Through his poem, Ralph
demonstrates not just a seriality with its own events and interrelations, but a fully realized nation
with a rich tapestry of history, culture, religion, and even a literature. And yet, through the tragic end that befalls both Zeuma and his people in the final lines of the poem, Ralph still suggests that without empire, and in particular the British Empire based in liberty, these rich nations and peoples are subject to the violence and suffering that comes from the unregulated power of other nations. Without ever appearing in the poem, the British Empire is present as a protection from such tragedies again befalling a nation such as this.

The processes of imperiography are at work throughout much of the poetry in the Atlantic world. The poets, like the ethnographers and land speculators of White’s theory, demonstrate a sustained interest in understanding, cataloging and organizing the array of peoples, nations and agencies at work throughout the Atlantic world. Even when poems are focused on a different subject or message, they often incorporate sustained gestures that help increase understanding of these serialities. In most of the cases here discussed, the poets have taken great liberties, either exaggerating or completely fictionalizing the peoples and events. However, authenticity and veracity, in this case, are wholly secondary to the ways in which such work opens up the imaginations of their audience and fundamentally change the mental schema through which these people understood the world around them. Because these shifts remain tied to the poetics of liberty that feed conceptions of empire, as attention shifts from empire to nation, so too will the poetics of liberty evolve as these serial nations begin to speak in their own voice and further shift the dynamics through which each seriality is understood.
Chapter 4: “Half Hell is in their Song”: The Poetics of Liberty in Poems of Slavery

The December 21, 1767 issue of the Newport Mercury, like many eighteenth-century colonial newspapers, represents a microcosm of the political, economic, and social issues of its day. The paper opens with an advertisement prominently featuring a detailed catalog of the goods available at a local merchant, many direct products of imperial commerce, including “Black Barcelona Handkerchiefs,” “Children’s Morrocco Shoes,” and “Irish Sattin,” as well as many of the staples of transatlantic commerce (Tea, chocolate and sugar). A long editorial which dominates the second page (addressed “To the Publick” from “A Friend of the Colony”) foreshadows the coming revolution as it rails against the economic inequity of mercantilism: “Nine Thousand dollars, drained out of our languishing Commerce in the short space of nine months, were lately sent off to Great Britain. This Sum was the Amount of duties on Molasses and Tea only.” The writer expands the argument by suggesting that only the cultivation of more diversified industries will allow the colony to preclude “inevitable Poverty and Ruin.” Elsewhere, a report on a conflict between Chicksaw and Creek Indians is discussed through the plight of a French hunting party that found themselves caught between the opposing nations and suffered captivity. The account shows the complexity of contemporary relations between native tribes, the French, and the British colonial authorities.

As always, amongst this background of imperial commerce and economic conflict, the shadow of slavery looms large throughout the paper; yet, the representations of the topic are far from uniform. The advertisements feature a five dollar reward for a runaway slave (“A likely negro, named James, very upright”) who escaped from Newport, and also “a negro girl of about 20 years” to be sold in an attempt to settle an estate. The lead story of the paper is a Traveler’s
narrative which, in its various accounts, offers a presentation of a “negro wedding” along the coast of Africa and then the traveler’s experiences of his return voyage across the middle passage onboard a slave ship. Strikingly, the traveler witnesses the brutality of the Captain first hand when midway through the voyage an attempted rebellion occurs:

A week passed very quietly, when the captain ordered the mate to go down and bring up twenty, saying ‘He would make the devils dance for their health,’ but no sooner was the hatch unbarred than a number of them, who had got off their irons, rushed upon the deck, and attacked the crew, but the sailors being armed with pistols and cutlasses, presently overcame them: but not before thirteen of the poor wretches had plunged into the sea, … Horrid as this scene was, the Captain felt no other concern than what arose from the loss of so many freights. He ordered the carcasses to be tumbled overboard and swore not a soul should see the sun till they arrived at Barbados.

The writer than closes his account of these events with a note that he is amazed that men claiming to be Christian and British could “so deviate from the laws of religion and liberty.” Invoking religion, liberty, and the utter brutality of the trade equally, the account demonstrates the state of the abolitionist movement and many of the rhetorical strategies that it will employ in the years and decades to follow.

In this sense, the paper gives us many of the stages of the life of a slave (at least as they were imagined in the colonies): the idyllic life before capture, the hellish brutality of the middle passage and the choices of the new world slave: faithful unrewarded service or dangerous flight. Yet, what makes this particular issue of the *Newport Mercury* most significant is the addition of a new representation of slavery in public discourse: the slave’s own creative expression. Credited
to “A Negro Girl (belonging to one Mr. Wheatley of Boston),” the poem on the third page purportedly repeats a story overheard from houseguests: “This Negro Girl at the same time ‘tending table, heard the relation.” The resulting poem, “On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin,” relates the gratitude and praise the poet has for the safe delivery of the titular figures from a shipwreck of Cape Cod. The poem, while highly occasional, is marked by many of the hallmarks of style that will define Wheatley’s later work: “Did haughty Eolus with contempt look down / With Aspect windy and a study’d frown? / Regard them not.—the Great supreme, the wise, / intends for something hidden from our eyes.” Wheatley’s classical training is plainly seen both in the construction of her lines in heroic couplets and in the classical references she employs throughout. Beyond these stylistic qualities, Wheatley’s poem also shows a similarity to Milton in how she constructs her pantheon; the classical gods exist, but as in the lines above, they are all a tier below the almighty Christian God who reigns supreme.

Towards the end of the poem there is also a bit of doubt on the part of the poet that characterizes many of Wheatley’s early poems, as she wavers before the final lines. The hesitation, which itself becomes a common gesture in many poems by slaves, expresses doubt in the aptitude of her poetic voice to capture the sentiment and beauty required to praise God: “Had I the tongue of a Seraphim, how I would exalt the Praise; Thy name as Incense to the heavens should fly; and the remembrance of thy goodness to the shoreless ocean of Beatitude! Then should the earth glow with seraphick Ardour.” Despite the beauty of the lines, and the way in which they are able to transcend the specific occasion of the poem, Wheatley seems to view her lines as unworthy of the subject. While this is a common poetical mode, it gains a particular resonance for these emerging voices in the debate over slavery. Although Wheatley is not the first published black poet, or even the first to gain international attention, she remains a major
figure in the genealogy of black American writers. Wheatley’s poetry, and the ways in which it demonstrated the capacity for learning in slaves, advanced the cause of abolition and liberty for all. The body of Wheatley’s work shows a careful and specific engagement with many of the political issues of the day, and represents a relatively late entry into a discourse about slavery that had been circulating throughout the Atlantic in poetry from the mid-seventeenth century.

In the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, there is no single greater challenge to the ongoing dialectic on liberty than the unmistakable evidence demonstrating how incongruous the institution of slavery is to any attempt to justify the imperial project. The specific conditions of the Atlantic world draw commercial, economic, and political relationships to the forefront of all social relations, and attempts by poets to define liberty through these dynamics directly clash with the social conditions experienced by the enslaved. As the poetics of liberty are applied in order to distinguish the British imperial project from that of the contemporary Spanish and those of antiquity, they must engage with the necessary breakdown of such discourse in light of the imposition of slavery on a scale (and with a systemization) that the globe had never seen. As mercantilist policies and Enlightenment thinking caused the reconfiguration of long-held beliefs on subjectivity and labor, slavery becomes increasingly problematic in both the colonies and metropole. Across the period, slavery moves from the background of such discourse to the fore, as both proponents and abolitionists turn to poetry, and specifically the poetics of liberty, in order to argue their positions.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the breakdown of the poetics of liberty in light of the harsh realities of slavery. As the role of slavery, and the growth of the slave trade, expand

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44 This honor belongs to Jupiter Hammon, who was first published 7 years prior to Phillis Wheatley (and whose work is examined later in this chapter).
drastically across the eighteenth century, poets engaged in the dialectic on liberty begin to recognize the incongruence of their political ideals and definitions of subjectivity with the realities which the imperial systems inflict directly upon slaves. These poets must then reconfigure the tropes of that discourse as the conditions of slavery throw the dominant definitions of liberty into disarray. Examining the ways in which the values of slavery are encoded, both directly and implicitly, in the poetry of liberty, I will demonstrate the ways in which our understanding of the sociocultural dynamics of the period can be refined to understand representations of labor, bodies, and subjects throughout the Atlantic world. In order to demonstrate the role of poetry in the debates on slavery, I will return again to the specific tropes of liberty to examine how they fail to include slavery and are then reassembled in the on-going debate. This group of tropes, including the figure of liberty, the empire of the seas, noble commerce, and comparisons to empires of antiquity, were used throughout the poetic representations of the lives of metropolitans, colonists, and natives, and yet, at their heart, each relies on the presence of slavery, never having existed outside the systems that subjugated others. This hypocrisy of using a poetics of liberty in support of a system that methodically captured and enslaved millions of Africans was apparent to some, and became increasingly prevalent as the eighteenth century continued. While many concentrated on the bounty of commerce, others noted the hands made invisible in the production of the goods that fueled it. Where some saw the mighty empire of the seas, others noted the dark task of the slave ship. As seen in the Newport Mercury quoted above, it’s clear that any sustained engagements with the policies of empire must reckon with the presence of slavery. As the poems examined in this chapter demonstrate, those writing about slavery, either in praise or in anger, enter the contemporary debates through the very same tropes, gestures, and formulations that make up the poetics of liberty.
As is the case with many issues of political debate, poetry provided a means to articulate a position and artfully debate its effects throughout the common discourse of coffeehouses, periodicals, and social clubs in North America, the Caribbean, and England. To abolitionist poets, poetry offered an aesthetic means for representing the staggering emotions and harsh realities of the slave condition. Many felt that, in representing the plight of slaves in verse, they were elevating their suffering in the public light, placing them alongside the slaves of antiquity and the Bible. Even proponents of slavery still wielded the rhetorical power of an argument presented in verse to articulate the necessity of the institution and praise the monetary growth that slavery created throughout the colonies. As the clash between the poetics of liberty and the machinations of slavery becomes increasingly clear, the poets of the period must choose to either bend the familiar tropes, or reject them outright, a choice that is faced by white poets throughout the Atlantic world, but that takes on new significance as voices of slaves emerge in the 1760s and later. In this midcentury period, the confluence of increased public concern over the nature of liberty inspired by the political events leading to the revolution, and the further expansion of the slave trade and systems of slavery brought these emerging voices to the forefront as never before, and an increased pool of abolitionists throughout the Atlantic world further aided their circulation. These poets used this specific rhetoric (and many of its neoclassical trappings) to authorize their entry into poetic discourse. The politics of slavery are hotly debated throughout the Atlantic world across the eighteenth century, but the discourse grows rapidly in the 1760s and 1770s when dialectics on liberty and freedom, once raised to criticize the plight of the colonies in the mercantilist economic system, become a clarion call throughout England and British North America for a reexamination of the condition of slaves and a better understanding of the manner in which the system operates.
Yet the issues inherent to slavery, and the scale and immensity of its impact, necessarily separate it from the other policies debated through the poetics of liberty. When employed by a slave—either free or still bound—the poetics of liberty and verse more widely represent a specific power. For many, including Jupiter Hammon and Phillis Wheatley, as well as Cambridge-educated Francis Williams, poetry became a means of demonstrating the capacity of Africans for refinement, civility and intelligence to a wide circle of readers. In this way, each and every poem published, regardless of subject, became a small political victory, laying a foundation for the equality that so many contemporary whites thought was a myth. Poetry thereby became a means of challenging the justifications for the power dynamics that governed slavery. While the dynamics of power remain embedded in the resulting verse, in opening a new discursive space, these poets demonstrate the larger symbolic power of poetic expression. Taking on the form and aesthetic expression of their oppressors allowed slave poets entry into a debate where their experience and abilities, while under intense scrutiny, were of incalculable value.

However, the archive of poetry about slavery necessarily displays the impact of the institution itself in systematically silencing the voices of the millions of slaves who witnessed it firsthand. In a system that deliberately created barriers between the slaves and literacy, the capacity for expression in verse was almost completely blocked—as slave voices did not emerge until the mid-eighteenth century. However, when these voices were able to overcome the barriers and join the poetic debate, it is clear that they were able to benefit from a long tradition of representations of slavery. In this way, these earliest poets fused the conventions of poetic discourse with their unique speaker position to help rewrite the dynamics that governed their former or current conditions. By harnessing the power of the tropes that were already in wide circulation, and combining them with the artfulness and expressiveness of their own voice, black
poets were able to significantly alter public opinion and advance the cause of liberty into the shadows that others had long neglected. While differences remained between those captured and those born into slavery, that is, whether freedom was a distinct personal memory or an abstract goal seemingly outside attainment, as the experiences of slaves and the new world varied further, the work of poets to represent the diverse roles they and others were playing in the new world, they further called into question the rights and practices that governed slavery.

In recent years, much effort has been made to expand the archive of material written on and by the slave experience in the New World. While there is always an asymptotic relationship with the finite amount of material slaves produced that limits the amount of new material, the field’s continued plumbing of the archive has garnered success and advanced our understanding of slavery in the eighteenth century in Europe, America, Latin America, and the Caribbean significantly. James Basker’s 2002 anthology Amazing Grace: An Anthology of poems about Slavery 1660-1810, has done significant work to establish a tradition of circulating poetry that, in ways both significant and slight, engages upon the topic of slavery. Basker’s methodology, to include both white and black poets in a singular tradition of discourse on the institution of slavery, has informed my approach here, as I will attempt to track the origins of poetry on slavery before fully examining how the poetics are employed by the black poets of the late eighteenth century. In his introduction, Basker makes a case for the important role poetry plays in not only this debate, but in all political discussion of the period:

Whatever the unevenness in aesthetic value, because poetry fills the interstices of our culture, from public spaces to private corners, in moments of high ceremony and in the spontaneous effusions of popular culture, this material maps the emergence of a collective awareness, the gradual appropriation of a subject
charged with aesthetic and moral power, and the spread of that awareness through the collective imagination of the Enlightenment (Basker, XXXIII-XXXIV)

In emphasizing the oft-noted disparity between the growth of knowledge and liberty in the Enlightenment with the explosive expansion of the institution of slavery across the Atlantic world, Basker highlights the ways in which, by filling the “interstices,” poetry is in a unique position in eighteenth century society. Basker continues his argument for the power of poetry by insisting that only verse can hope to approximate the reality of slavery, saying that only poetry presents “the transformation of sin and sorrow into grace, of suffering into beauty, of alienation into empathy and connection, of the unspeakable into imaginative literature” (XXXIV). This transformative power of poetry to take the ugliest force in the New World and transform it into beauty is certainly behind much of the poetry on slavery. But beyond tapping into just a tradition on slavery, it is important to note how these poems draw on a wider tradition of New World liberty. By focusing their energies through the reconfiguration of dominant tropes, these poets are able to amplify the verse created in this cause and, as I argue here, are able to fundamentally change perceptions not just of the institution of slavery, but the very nature of liberty. As Edward Cahill has argued, discourses on aesthetics and liberty were mutually reinforcing across the eighteenth century, reciprocally working to define experience in art and art in experience. As Milton’s works and career demonstrate, an attention to aesthetics operates symbiotically with an attention to liberty. For Milton and these poets operating in the Atlantic, the creative expression of the self is only realized through liberty. To that effect, by situating these poems and poets amongst the works examined elsewhere in this dissertation, I am arguing that we not see this as a separate tradition reacting to slavery but as a natural expansion of the ongoing dialectic of liberty in the imperial project, reframing Basker’s argument in the larger context, but still operating
within the spirit of his collection. As Basker argues, “By giving form to the previously unimagined, poetry helps shape reality, offering new models or blueprints for change, both personal and societal” (XXXV). In the context of larger aesthetic concerns, recognizing that the basis of these blueprints is in a rich language of personal liberty explains both the effectiveness of such poems and the reasons behind the intense increase in the volume of poetry on slavery in the mid to late eighteenth century.

In order to trace the evolution of the poetics of liberty into the specific discourse about slavery, I will begin by returning to two works: Pope’s “Windsor-Forest,” and Grainger’s *The Sugar-Cane* to reexamine the presence of slavery within the larger context of commercial and political liberty. To demonstrate how slavery emerges from this foundation and becomes more prevalent in the discourse on liberty, I will then explore a series of poems, primarily from periodical and broadside sources, that show the application of the poetics of New World liberty by white poets intervening in a variety of contemporary debates relating to slavery. These debates range from mercantilism generally, to the specific issues of the legal rights of slaves in Massachusetts, concerns over miscegenation in South Carolina, and subsequently to the larger abolition movement. Finally, to demonstrate the ways in which the poetics of liberty are employed and transformed by slaves themselves, I will turn to the earliest slave poets, including Francis Williams, Jupiter Hammon, and Phillis Wheatley. By exploring the dynamics of this appropriation, I trace the emergence of poets of color, the particular significance of these poets in the larger dialectic on liberty, and the larger functions their expressions of creativity and art hold in the abolition movement.

The poetics of liberty, as a discourse based in empire, is a part of the social and cultural dynamics that ensure the oppression of the slaves, and maintain the dominance of the races and
classes that carry the economic and political power. This discourse then, in order to first account for and then later incorporate the individual liberty of slaves must evolve, changing not only its signifiers, but the long-held values that underwrite the tropes themselves. As I shall demonstrate, the trajectory listed above makes clear that the narrative of liberty that is written in the language of commerce and empire changes in light of slavery. This evolution occurs in two clear steps: First, abolitionists and slaves redefine individual liberty in the language and aesthetics of the Christian tradition, using shared religion to validate humanity and reset the terms of the master/slave relationship. Defining liberty in Christian terms, which allows these poets to return to Miltonic rhetoric, calls the practices of slavery into question through a discourse of civility and refinement. Second, as the century progresses, Christian liberty gives way to a fuller discourse of human rights and individual subjectivity. This later stage, which coincides with the American Revolution, uses the established terms of liberty to articulate a new definition of subjectivity for all. The processes involved in this evolution are present throughout the poetry of the Atlantic world as discourse of empire and commerce are rewritten into discourses of individuality and subjectivity all under the purview of the poetics of liberty. This coincides with the broader historical processes that mark the shift from empire to nation, and that elevate the individual within the sociopolitical structures of the Atlantic world. Finally, in poetry, this evolution also contains a generic dimension, as across the century the dominant political models shift from the language of epic, and its rich ties to empire, and align more and more with the lyric, and its ability to capture human emotion and experience. My selections in this chapter demonstrate these changes, as they change in both content and form, working to represent liberty in all of its dynamics.
Even in the earliest decades of empire, the institution of slavery is deeply entwined with the poetics of liberty and the cultural, economic, and political relationships that govern the Atlantic world. The earliest poets operating to define the Atlantic world thereby faced decisions of how to represent slavery within the larger imperial system, often choosing figurations that ignored the cruelties of the system in favor of celebrating the economic accomplishments it facilitated. One such example, Alexander Pope’s 1713 poem “Windsor-Forest” shows how complicated the relationship between commerce and slavery is. Written in the immediate wake of the Treaty of Utrecht, the poem celebrates the victory of Britain in the negotiated peace and the power that British commerce now holds. Yet, a significant (though neglected—at least by Pope) component of that new found power is the passage from Spain to Britain of the Asiento, a major slavery contract that led to Britain’s ascendency to power in the slave trade across the entirety of the Atlantic World. As explained previously, the poem’s primary mode is a renewed nationalism and pride in Britain and the power of its commerce that will now extend across the Atlantic. In the poem’s iconic image, the trees of Windsor forest are lauded and praised by the Thames for the ways in which they will figuratively and literally fuel British expansion: “Thy Trees, fair Windsor! Now shall leave their Woods, / And half the Forests rush into my floods, / Bear Britain’s Thunder, and her Cross display, / To the bright Regions of the rising Day” (383-6). The poem credits the forest for how its trees will flood the oceans as the boats and ships that fuel commerce and naval power. The presence of thunder (might/violence) and cross (nationalism/religion) demonstrates the ways in which such symbols are empowered by an array of political and social institutions within the larger discourse on liberty. Yet this passage doesn’t acknowledge how many of these boats will be used to quite literally end the liberty of enslaved Africans under the expanded Asiento agreement. Rhetorical gestures such as this separate the
products of commerce from the labor that produces them, making such labor invisible to the populace of the metropole.

While not deliberately trying to hide the nature of slavery, Pope also does not celebrate the ways in which Britain is expanding the slave trade in the wake of Utrecht, preferring instead to assert that such an expansion of British liberty will instead fuel a time of harmony across the globe, including the freedom of those that have been enslaved. In the longer address of the Thames to the titular Forest, the argument is made that all the world’s peoples will benefit from this expansion: “O stretch thy Reign, fair Peace! From Shore to Shore/ Till Conquest cease, and Slav’ry be no more:/ Till the freed Indians in their native Groves/ Reap their own Fruits, and woo their Sable Loves” (405-8).45 By renouncing slavery in this specific way, both contextualized in the larger expansion of liberty and as the rightful destination of British rule, Pope displays a slight disapproval of the system and also creates a link between its abolition and the reign of true liberty and peace. While this is profoundly hypocritical as a celebration of a treaty that actually works to expand British slavery, it is interesting to note that, to Pope at least, slavery has no place in an empire ruled purely by liberty. The combination of these gestures seems to suggest that slavery is a necessary evil that will be abandoned once full rule is realized, or perhaps even sooner. Pope is also using the poetics of liberty to extend a basic humanity to the racialized individuals, asserting that their own right to rule and labor in “their native groves” is the righteous goal of peace. The passage ends by arguing (in a quite Miltonic gesture) that only once liberty is given to all Indians, will Peace finally vanquish an array of personified foes including

45 It is important to note in the quote that follows that “Indians” is used in this historical moment essentially as non-European. As Basker explains, “Typical of his era, Pope uses the word “Indians” to refer without distinction to Africans, Asians and Amerindians—the term derives of course from “Indies,” both West and East” (48). Interestingly, in 1714’s The Rape of the Lock, Pope with instead choose “Africk’s Sable Sons,” to more specifically represent the plight of Africans; however, this has more to do with the necessity of emphasizing the blackness of the Africans to equate them with particular suits in a card game.
“Discord,” “pride,” “Terror,” “Vengeance,” “Persecution,” and “Rebellion” (412-420). These “barb’rous” entities, not of any faction or social group, will be returned to Hell in bondage if true liberty is attained. While certainly more of bravado than of policy, Pope’s depiction of the growth of commerce recognizes the presence of slavery within the systems of empire. This gesture, particularly coming from Pope, who already enjoyed prominent status in England, would certainly have had an effect on its readership, linking the causes of liberty and slavery at a fundamental level.

From the vantage point of the opposite side of the Atlantic, slavery is an even more prominent component of the imperial system, and of daily life. Poets working in North America, particularly in the Caribbean, bear direct witness to the system’s workings and recognize it in their figurations of empire. James Grainger’s *The Sugar-Cane*, as I explained in chapter two, uses the traditional form of the georgic to explain the proper functioning of a sugar plantation in Jamaica and thereby must directly address the role of slavery in the process. The long poem, written primarily in praise of the ways in which empire operates to empower cultivation and refinement of the staple crop (and by extension, foreign lands and peoples) must necessarily reconcile itself with the presence of slaves on the plantation and the ways in which their labor empowers the entire process (and, by extension, the empire). Grainger’s solution to the clash of his poetics with the brutality of slavery is to cleanse the practices of their brutality. As Carl Plasa has articulated in *Slaves to Sweetness: British and Caribbean Literatures of Sugar*, the process and language of refinement come to embody the poem’s treatment of slavery:

Grainger’s text is as much a poem of evasion as of display, consistently censoring the racial and sexual oppression intrinsic to the plantation culture which inspires it. What is significant about *The Sugar-Cane*’s gaps and silences is the parallels
they suggest between aesthetic and economic orders, the making of the poem and the making of the sugar it celebrates: Grainger’s text excludes from itself those aspects of slavery the genteel reader might find unpalatable (3).

Plasa’s reading of the poem emphasizes these ways in which slavery is refined in order to not upset the reader’s consumption of the staple (and the poem), to maintain the economic processes that support the empire. In other words, while the goal is to make the processes of commerce visible, there are limits to that vision. As Plasa further argues, the poetic form helps to reinforce this same message, as encoding slavery within the civilized lines of verse elevates and cleanses it further.

The result of this effort to refine the poem is that the conditions of the slaves receive very little attention within the larger instruction of the poem, often represented abstractly, or only through their utility to the plantation. Such efforts use the guise of the economic to supplant the social; what matters is the product, not the labor. While practices of cultivating, harvesting, and refining are described, most often the poem keeps the hands at work invisible. However, it must be recognized that in giving even broad and abstracted representation to the lives of slaves, Grainger works to extend awareness of slavery throughout the Atlantic world, specifics which, even if refined, write slavery into the economics of the empire. As Plasa notes, “Despite the poem’s discursive vigilance, however, what it seeks to expunge remains stubbornly present, appearing in displaced, distorted, and fragmentary forms which vitiate the saccharine portrayal of slavery its author seeks to uphold” (3). To wit, the presence of slavery remains in the poem, felt in its absence and/or the detritus that remains after its removal. In this way, Grainger’s refinement is not completely successful, leaving his idealized account as well as ‘fragments’ of the unrefined.
In the first book of the poem, Grainger presents the work of the slaves, an act which, even in the simplicity of its descriptions, works to make visible the condition of the slaves in public discourse. Describing the “Negroe-Train” that the planter should employ, Grainger explains the labor that makes up their daily plantation life:

Disperse all-jocund, o’er the long-hoed land.
The bundles some untie; the withered leaves,
Others strip artful off, and careful lay,
Twice one junk, distant in the ampest bed:
O’er these, with hasty hoe, some lightly spread
The mounded interval; and smooth the trench:
Well-pleas’d, the master-swain reviews their toil;
And rolls, in fancy, many a full fraught cask… (I.399-406)

This merry image of the slaves planting is without question idealized to saccharine effect, eliminating a great deal of suffering and sorrow in nearly every line. Yet, it’s important not to let those qualities overwhelm the fact that Grainger, in explaining these actions, is making his audience in the metropole directly aware of the work completed by slaves in Jamaica as they prepare a product that those same readers likely have on the table. By making visible the invisible hands of labor, Grainger puts the human cost of the staple back into the discussion of the empire of commerce. The passage also suggests, by way of the “all-jocund” slaves and the “well-pleas’d” master that, if implemented with due kindness and consideration, the labor of slaves can be improved and made more productive. Even if presenting a broad caricature of the actual labor, Grainger is at least making a case for kind treatment of the slaves, recognizing their dignity, if only slightly (or only for economic gain).

Later, in the third book of the poem, as Grainger continues to attempt to represent the highly systemized plantation life with the simple agricultural pleasures that are traditional to the georgic form, Grainger demonstrates that slavery, as the most brutal and violent aspect of plantation life, is a source of shame for planter, poet, and muse. Even if refined, the image of
slavery is set against the traditional artistic values of the muse that inspires the poem. In this passage, slavery becomes a reason for plantation life’s inability to equal the grandeur of antiquity, and perhaps a value at odds with the aesthetic nature of poetry itself:

Nor need the driver, Aethiop authoriz’d,
Thence more inhuman, crack his horrid whip;
From such dire sounds the indignant muse averts
Her virgin-ear, where musick loves to dwell:
‘Tis malice now, ‘tis wantonness of power
To lash the laughing, laboring, singing throng. (III.141-6)

Grainger’s muse falters here, as she frequently does, unwilling to describe the brutality of the lashing. While the muse shies away from the brutal master, she is united through music to the “laughing, laboring, singing throng.” This idealized depiction of the slaves at labor is dubious, but the effect is to instruct the plantation owners in the benefits of kind management. As Plasa argues, “While the authenticity of the contentment with which Grainger’s ‘throng’ carries out its work may be doubted, such feigned pleasures serve a genuine strategic function, rendering redundant the ‘horrible whip’, which would otherwise ‘crack’ across the bodies of the enslaved in a cruel bid to increase their productivity” (18). This distinction writes labor into its elevated depiction and art, closing the gap between the poetic and the economic; yet, the ‘horrid whip’ remains, its presence felt in the implied use it finds in the hands of lesser owners.

Grainger’s fourth book returns to a more detached engagement with the brutality of slavery, as he advises the aspiring planters for whom the poem is written as instruction to choose slaves carefully. As Basker notes, “When it was published…Grainger’s Book IV was the longest sustained treatment of African slavery to have appeared in English poetry…[but] for all of
Grainger’s self-professed humanity, readers have long been struck by his blindness to the indefensible evil of slavery” (154-155). Such blindness is immediately apparent in the fourth book, as the advice given expresses how all decisions should be made with a mind toward the needs of the plantation while no mention is made of the suffering and violence done. While grating to modern readers, such passages that demonstrate this blindness focus primarily around the better functioning of the plantation: “Planter, chuse the slave, / Who sails from barren climes; where art alone, / offspring of rude necessity, compels / The sturdy native, or to plant the soil, / or stem vast rivers for his daily food” (IV.57-61). The suffering of the slave’s prior experience goes unrecognized here except for how it has led to create better work ethics in the slave. Grainger continues by cataloging an array of regions in Africa and discussing their relative quality in both physique and character. The entire discussion is, of course, framed within the practical knowledge needed by the farmer, but the array and depth of knowledge Grainger includes in his verse is rather staggering. His awareness of the variations in tribes, regions and affiliations does much to characterize the slaves. In his readers, this again inspires a fundamental understanding of the basic humanity of the slaves and retrieves a sense of individual agency from the mass of anonymous black faces that defined (and continue to define) our conceptualization of enslaved Africans. This work, much in line with the imperiography that catalogued the communities of natives, helped Grainger’s readers to imagine slaves as another constituent community within empire. Grainger’s position at the start of Caribbean literature, and his newfound significance to Atlantic and Caribbean scholars, makes these depictions all the more significant (Plasa, 8-9).

46 “The slaves from Minnah are of stubborn breed: / But when the bill, or hammer, they affect; / they soon perfection reach. But fly, with care, / The Moco-nation; they themselves destroy” (IV.99-102).
This section reaches its crescendo in a passage in which, in making a clear argument for the humane treatment of slaves, Grainger uses empathetic expressions of slaves’ past experiences to argue for mercy and basic human kindness. The passage, which again, is not by any means abolitionist, is worth quoting at some length to demonstrate the ways in which it draws from the poetics of liberty to make its case:

Yet, planter, let humanity prevail.—

Perhaps thy negroe, in his native land,
Possest large fertile plains, and slaves, and herds:
Perhaps, whene’er he deign’d to walk abroad,
The richest silks, from where the Indus rolls,
His limbs invested in their gorgeous pleats:
Perhaps he wails his wife, his children, left
To struggle with adversity: Perhaps
Fortune, in battle for his country fought,
Gave him a captive to his deadliest foe:
Perhaps, incautious, in his native fields,
(On pleasurable scenes his mind intent)
All as he wandered; from neighboring grove,
Fell ambush dragg’d him to the hate main.—
Were they even sold for crimes; ye polish’d say!
Ye to whom Learning opes her ampest page!
Ye, whom the knowledge of a living God
Should lead to virtue! Are ye free of crimes?
Ah pity, then, these uninstructed swains;
And still let mercy soften the decrees
Of rigid justice, with her lenient hand. (IV.211-31)

This unprecedented representation of the slave again draws to mind the imperiography of Ed White’s depiction of natives, as clearly the comparison is drawn between slave and planter. The passage understands the social structures that exist in Africa, but immediately dismisses them in favor of the slave’s status on the plantation, and yet, the lines are clearly meant to inspire empathy through the presentation of the lives of the slaves as quite similar to that of the readers, both in employment (agriculture and trade) and in familial ties (Husband and father). Grainger argues that these slaves, at least prior to their capture and sale, were not unlike the aspiring plantation masters to whom he writes, or even the larger public readership the poem sees in England. Grainger then expands the argument by citing both learning and religion as values opposed to the brutality of slavery, arguing that those for whom these values flow are led to virtue and not “free from crimes.” Even in approaching the hypocrisy of the Enlightenment’s expansion of slavery, Grainger is careful not to extend the gesture fully. That is, while one might expect this argument for liberty and humanity to end with a call for abolition, Grainger only argues for mercy and kindness, a common approach of public discourse that recognizes both the insidious evil and the economic necessity of slavery. The stanza that follows suggests that the muse, in her pure form, would make such an argument for freedom, but Grainger chooses not to. While he is willing to draw from the poetics of liberty to argue for mercy, he has carefully hedged these gestures to continue the maintenance of the plantation system.

While Pope and Grainger had a specific readership, it should be noted also that many lesser known poets took to debating slavery in the pages of periodicals, broadsides, and other
ephemora. While often intervening in a specific debate related to slavery (often of particular local interest), the poems reflect contemporary attitudes towards the larger institution, and the organic connections such debates have with larger discourses on empire and liberty. As early as the 1690s, as the empire of commerce tropes first grow in popularity, many poets recognize the interdependency of empire on commerce and commerce on slavery. In 1697, an anonymous Scottish poet used the occasion of the founding of the Royal Company of Scotland to express how commerce empowers liberty: “This company designs a Colony. / To which all Mankind freely may resort, / And find quick Justice in an open Port” (Anonymous 36). The familiar trope of *translatio studii* is here used to describe how open commerce inspires the rule of just law.

Beyond the liberty such colonies and trade will provide, there is also a great economic freedom enabled by the new undertaking, one in which all will benefit: “There every Man may choose a pleasant Seat, / Which poor Men will make Rich, & Rich Men Great” (Anonymous 36). Note how absolute the expression of the equation is; commerce enables improvement on the part of all the colonists and works to benefit all. Yet, in juxtaposition to this favored position held by the colonists and defined primarily by freedom to choose and economic gain, the poet also includes the image of slaves, at once empowering commerce and existing beneath it:

Black Slaves like bussie Bees will plant them canes

Have Juice more sweet than honey in their Veins

Which boil’d to Sugar, brings in constant gains,

They’l raise them cotton, Ginger, Indigo,

Luscious Potatoes, and the rich Coco.

Ships thence increase to fetch these goods away,

For which the stock will ready money pay.
By Manufacturers here the Poor will live,
So they that go and they that stay will thrive. (Anonymous 36)

While slaves are credited with fueling trade, they are presented as less than human, “bussie bees” that work industriously without thought. While slaves are credited with raising and harvesting the rich cargoes, the language of cultivation is absent, dropped in favor of the drone analogy. In fact, the repeated use of “them” even suggests a lesser refinement, a roughness to their presence. The poet, while displaying a clear awareness of all the richness that mercantilism provides, is more concerned with how their efforts are simply one piece of the imperial system. This alienates their labor from them and defines it only through its benefits to the metropole (the ships). By defining the slaves through their labor and not through their humanity, the labor is valued while sidestepping the moral questions that encircle slavery.

The anonymous Scottish poem is representative of the major trend in early poems on slavery in not only some of the attitudes it expresses, but also in its highly occasional nature. For much of the opening three decades of the eighteenth century, poems about slavery primarily arise in response to specific events or conflicts. As I’ve shown throughout many public debates of the period, figures turned to poetry in order to present their views and more effectively persuade larger segments of the public into agreement. In this light, poetry was used to empower an argument; poetry granted an aesthetic quality that often operated to make the argument more memorable (if presented in rhyme, for example) or to endow it with artistic qualities. Poetry used to enhance a rhetorical position extended the refinement of the verse to the idea it represented. Depending on the seriousness of the debate or the notoriety of the events discussed, these poems were entered into prominent newspapers or perhaps published (by speaker or a patron) as a broadside in their own right. However, whereas debates over commerce could draw directly from
the poetics of liberty, poems concerning debates over slavery operate in a more difficult rhetorical position, as the positions of the speakers frequently clash with the predominant discourses of liberty, and show the inadequacy of the same tropes to encompass the reality of the Atlantic world.

As literary scholars have turned to the Atlantic, this connection between the rise of modernity and the simultaneous explosion of the slave trade has been of central importance. The ways in which race figures into the primary theorizations of the period continues to be a source of disagreement. Laura Doyle, in *Freedom’s Empire: Race and the Rise of the Novel in Atlantic Modernity 1640-1940*, argues that contemporary conceptualizations of liberty and empire in the Atlantic were dominated by typological myths founded in race. As she argues: “the Anglo-Saxon race’s entry into a ‘state’ of liberty is from the beginning associated with an Atlantic crossing and trauma of exile that, moreover, resonates richly with Old Testament narratives of sea-crossing by another, affiliated, freedom-seeking race” (4). As with Milton’s dual vision, the English of Doyle’s description seek understanding of their current situation through historical precedent, using the narratives of the past (in this case the Bible) to authorize a set of actions in the present. But, as Doyle continues, such understandings of liberty are complicated by race:

Anglo-Atlantic and African-Atlantic narratives of English diverge radically, of course—as determined exactly by the racialization of liberty that deems one group free and the other not yet capable of freedom—even while the narrative of a sea-crossing and an experience of exilic self-loss underlies both sets of stories. Indeed, by the end of the eighteenth century Anglo-Atlantic and African-Atlantic authors were writing back and forth to each other in a vexed dialectic centering on
this chronotype. Anglo-Atlantic authors do so less consciously…in habitual gestures, [they] subordinate and elide this presence (5).

As Doyle notes, the negotiation of race is a consistent presence at the foundational level of any discourse on liberty in the Atlantic world. Beyond this, she asserts that, despite narratological similarity, these discourses are kept separate. However, I disagree. While initial conceptions separate forms of individual liberties of the races, as the eighteenth century progresses, the two discourses coincide, subsumed with the evolutions of liberty writ large. As I have traced the terms through which slavery is first called into question in light of individual liberty represent an outgrowth and extension of the discourse on liberty. That is, recognition and definition of the liberty of Europeans draws that of enslaved Africans into question, and eventually leads to the reconfiguration of the poetics of liberty to include slaves within its structures. In order to demonstrate the specific role of the poetics of liberty within this larger ideological struggle, I will now turn to examine how poets use interventions into specific occasional debates to not only forward a specific vision of liberty and slavery, but also how their efforts to “subordinate and elide this presence” work counterintuitively to create a record of slavery’s presence throughout the Atlantic. Such conflicts represent the overlap of politics, law, and philosophy as they negotiate the position of these demographics.

An important (and early) example of a conflict such as this occurred right at the turn of the eighteenth century in Boston. The conflict occurred over the status of a slave named Adam who sought, through legal means, to be emancipated from his owner John Saffin. Adam was represented in the matter by Samuel Sewall, a well-educated puritan of the city. As the trial continued, the conflict extended from the legal realm into the literary, with both Sewall and Saffin publishing works in prose and verse to support their views on the case. Sewall, publishing
first in 1700, used a prose work entitled *The Selling of Joseph* to lay out a moral and religious case against the institution of slavery. His rhetorical position, which shares much with the approach of documents on liberty created during the revolutionary period that defines the other end of the century, uses Bible passages to create a claim for the divinely-instilled equality of all men, and uses the language of liberty to do it:

FOR AS MUCH as Liberty is in real value next unto Life: None ought to part with it themselves, or deprive others of it, but upon most mature Consideration.

The Numerousness of Slaves at this day in the Province, and the Uneasiness of them under their Slavery, hath put many upon thinking whether the Foundation of it be firmly and well laid; so as to sustain the Vast Weight that is built upon it.

It is most certain that all Men, as they are the Sons of *Adam*, are Coheirs; and have equal Right unto Liberty, and all other outward Comforts of Life (Sewall).

This passage, the document’s opening, demonstrates the certitude of Sewall’s position. He views the existence of slavery as standing against natural law and divine will. By uniting all of mankind as “The Sons of Adam,” Sewall both invokes the specific case and uses the shared humanity of masters and slaves as a reason for the abolition of the practice. Sewall mourns the loss of liberty throughout, returning frequently to expound on it as the fundamental human right that invalidates slavery.47 By rewriting dominant narratives, Sewall unmakes racial distinctions through shared characteristics, challenging the dominant perceptions that Laura Doyle discussed.

The publication of Sewall’s argument in 1700 drew a response from Saffin. As Sewall’s ardent abolitionism inspired shifts in the views of other major Boston Puritans, the lot of Saffin

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47 Perhaps the most inspired reference demonstrates the incongruous relationship of humanity and price: “There is no proportion between Twenty Pieces of Silver, and LIBERTY. The Commodity it self is the Claimer.”
was to defend the institution of slavery, and specifically his own possession of Adam, in the
court of public opinion. To do this, Saffin turns to poetry, inserting a poem entitled “The
Negroes Character” into his longer document, *A Brief and Candid Answer to...The Selling of
Joseph*. In the poem, which Basker grants the dubious distinction of being the first poem in
English to defend slavery, Saffin bases his defense squarely on the notion that blacks are of a
different (and lower) character than whites, which makes the institution of slavery permissible.
The poem, given here in its entirety, is a good reminder of the prevailing attitudes which later
works will harness aesthetic expression to combat:

Cowardly and cruel are those Blacks innate,
Prone to Revenge, Imp of inveterate hate.
He that exasperates them, soon espies
Mischief and Murder in their very eyes.
Libidinous, Deceitful, False and Rude,
The spume issue of Ingratitude.
The premises consider’d, all may tell,
How near good Joseph they are parallel. (Saffin 37)

Basing his defense of slavery in the character of blacks, Saffin reasserts distinctions in familiar
gestures that lessen the humanity of the slaves in order to justify their subordination. Depicting
slaves only in barbarous language in order to assert their inhumanity, Saffin asserts that they are
“Libidinous, Deceitful, False and Rude,” and that they must be controlled lest such primitive
emotions rule. The turn in the final couplet, an appeal to public opinion and an indictment of the
veracity of Sewall’s text, demonstrates the particular rhetorical situation in which the poem was
entered. Through simple meter and rhyme, the poem becomes more memorable and more potent
for the audience, allowing for easier memorization that may allow wider dissemination throughout the public sphere.

Whether Sewall or Saffin was more effective in the court of opinion remains unknowable but by 1703, Saffin had decisively won in the court of law and Adam continued to be held in slavery. Sewall, first in his journal and then in later editions of *The Selling of Joseph*, inscribed an angry poem meant to undermine the authority of the judge in the case and lament further the suffering of Adam (and other slaves by extension). The short poem first lashes out at the judge’s character, “Superanuated Squier, wigg’d and powder’d with pretence, / Much beguiles the just Assembly by his lying Impudence,” before mournfully expressing the human cost of the decision: “which means poor simple Adam sinks to slavery again” (Sewall, 40). The sympathetic turn, set against the anger and passion of the opening, demonstrates Sewall’s grief at the loss. “Poor simple Adam,” while potentially working to undermine Adam’s standing, creates great sympathy in that he is not of full standing in their society and would likely not understand the fullness of the court’s processes. Thus, while Sewall was ultimately unsuccessful, for many later poets he stood as a moral hero who used what position he had to articulate a clear case for the end of slavery. His poem stands as an attempt to reconcile the competing discourses of liberty and slavery that were coexistent in the public sphere of the Atlantic world. By appropriating rhetorical appeals from the larger discourse on liberty, he demonstrates how these tropes could be easily adapted for the abolitionist cause.

Elsewhere in the Atlantic world, debate ranged not on the level of abolition/preservation, but more centrally focused on matters of moral treatment and the practice of Christian values in the context of slavery. Indeed, as the presence of slaves in the New World increased, more and more conflicts and issues arose within and between households as many individuals tried to
reconcile the ownership of slaves with their political views and religious morals. In light of the poetics of liberty breaking down, colonists sought other means through which to understand slave ownership, and once again turn to public poetry as a means of refining their conclusions. In an interesting exchange from the *South Carolina Gazette* in 1732, two anonymous poets debate the proper response to the temptation male slave owners felt in the presence of their female slaves. The pair of poems demonstrates how authors turned to verse to elevate their argument, while also (inadvertently) preserving the suffering of slaves in public discourse. The first poem, entitled “The Chameleoon Lover,” was printed in the March 11 issue and, while brief, was certainly a provocative call to end miscegenation. The rhetorical position suggests that those that give in to the temptations offered by their slaves are tainted by such interactions. Here is the brief poem in full:

If what the *Curious* have observ’d be true,
That the *Cameleon* will assume the *Hue*
Of all the Objects that approach its *Touch*;
No wonder then, that the *Amours* of such
Whose *Taste* betrays them to a close Embrace
With the *dark* Beauties of the *Sable* Race
(Stain’d with the Tincture of the *Sooty* Sin,)
*Imbibe* the *blackness* of their *Charmer’s* Skin (*The Chameleoon Lover*)

Of central focus to these lines is the figuration of color and the ways in which it plays a part in sexual interactions between masters and slaves, and by extension, the wider range of such interactions. The poet here uses an elegant tone to disguise views on a taboo subject, and perhaps most egregiously gives the agency behind the sin to the slave, the “Charmer” of the “Sable
Race.” Although sin is mentioned, the concern about those who commit the act is not really made as a moral argument, but rather through a fear that the slave’s skin will somehow taint the owner in the act. The play on blackness as both skin color and sin reinforces this point. The author is clearly unconcerned by the plight of the slave and the sexual violence implied, only worried instead that such couplings will denigrate the character of the master (and perhaps wider society). Here skin color is used as animal tropes (such as the Chameleon) have been used: as a means of denigrating the slave and asserting their unsuitability for liberty. Even here when condemning the act, they elide questions of political status.

A week later, the *South Carolina Gazette* features two responses to the “The Cameleon Lover,” a prose letter and a short poem attributed to “Sable,” entitled “Cameleon’s Defense.” While the (marginally) better defense is offered in the letter, the earlier poem seems to necessitate the writing of a verse response, in order to debate the assertions clearly. The combination of taking up the defense as well as taking on the name of the blamed race places the poem in conflict with the first, but both actions seem to be more playful (the poet does not actually take on the voice of the slave in the defense). Instead, the poet makes the case for public acceptance of relationships between the races:

All Men have Follies, which they blindly trace
Thro’ the dark Turnings of a dubious maze:
But happy those, who, by a prudent Care,
Retreat betimes, from the fallacious Snare.
The eldest Sons of Wisdom were not free,
From the same Failure you condemn in me.
If as the Wisest of the Wise have err’d
I go astray and am condemn’d unheard,
My Faults you too severely reprehend,
More like a rigid Censor than a Friend.
Love is the Monarch Passion of the Mind,
Knows no Superior, by no Laws confin’d:
But triumphs still, impatient of Controll,
O’er all the proud Endowments of the Soul (Sable).

Considered in isolation, the poem’s final adulation of love is aesthetically pleasing, but in light of the gross mischaracterization of the sexual abuse of slaves as an act of love (and not of lust or the assertion of power) the poem empowers a set of values that maintain the institution of slavery and excuse one of its worst practices. Garbed in poetic language, such attraction becomes love instead of lust or abuse, unwriting the dynamics of power that direct such couplings. The defense offered concedes the point that such relationships are sinful and harmful to those who participate in them, but only offers the defense that “The Wisest of the Wise have err’d.” The debate presented by the two poems presents common themes of contemporary religion, the taint of sin, and the faultiness of human character, but in light of the conditions of slavery described, the degree to which these poems disregard the humanity of those being afflicted by the lasciviousness of the acts in question is astounding. Beyond this, it demonstrates public attention on how skin color affects traditional poetry of beauty and how such work fits into larger traditions. These prevailing views (which are not limited to the discourse in the South) are the
arena into which Wheatley and other slave poets will enter, and many will tap into similar systems of morality to assert their humanity and the quality of their character.\(^48\)

As seen in Grainger’s work, poets living in the Caribbean have a more complex view of slavery, as they were often more aware of the specifics of the slave condition as well as the necessity of their labor in the imperial commercial system. One such poet, Bryan Edwards, demonstrates this complexity as he oscillates between clear sympathy for the slaves, but also is clear that abolition is not a suitable alternative. Edwards’ most famous poems, which he collected in his *Poems Written Chiefly in the West Indies* (Kingston, 1792), demonstrate the ways in which poets attempted to represent the experience of slaves within the larger system. One such poem, “Stanzas, Occasioned by the Death of Alico, An African Slave, Condemned for Rebellion, in Jamaica, 1760,” remained unpublished until the 1790s, enters into many of the public debates about slavery and religion (and empire) of the 1760s. In the poem, Edwards represents the perspective of a slave condemned to death by taking on the slave’s voice, a trope that would become prominent throughout abolitionist poetry, and that draws from the poetics of liberty. Speaking as the condemned slave, the opening lines elevate the cause of freedom for which the slave is condemned: “‘Tis past:—Ah! Calm thy cares to rest! / Firm and unmoved am I:— / In Freedom’s cause, I bar’d my breast, — / In freedom’s cause I die” (Edwards 131). These lines powerfully evoke the nobility of the slave and the cause for which he fought (freedom), a tone that dominates the whole poem. While the slave is unable to enter his own thoughts into public discourse, Edwards’s work is able to give that perspective a voice. In doing so, the poet places

\(^{48}\) The most infamous example of slavery being written into the tradition of love poetry is Isaac Teale’s “The Sable Venus: An Ode,” which uses the exoticized beauty of black woman to explore the dynamics of romantic relationships that cross racial divides. Isaac Teale was a mentor of Bryan Edwards, who included his poem within his compendiums.
his sympathies alongside the doomed rebel, not with the laws of the colony, suggesting that there is liberty that exists outside of law and the institution of slavery.

The slave continues his speech by offering comfort to those assembled for his execution, explaining that in death he will be returned to his native land and finally experience the liberty for which he fought. Beyond this, the poem asserts that, through his own Christian beliefs, he is somewhat more pure than his oppressors, and will be rewarded in his return across the sea: “No christian tyrant there is known / To mark his steps with blood, / No sable mis’ry’s piercing moan / resounds thro ev’ry wood!” To Edwards, the oxymoronic quality of “christian tyrant” demonstrates just how far from their espoused values slave owners have strayed and suggests that his cries will continue. Indeed, Edwards chooses to omit the standard capitalization to emphasize the fallen nature of the slave owner, standing in contrast with a few lines later when mournful Christians are given the usual honorific.49

While Edwards is not an abolitionist, he seems, in giving the condemned slave a voice, to be wary of the institution and the practices it requires, placing them directly in opposition to the Christianity that influences slave and master alike. In the closing stanzas, the slave’s full nobility is revealed as he welcomes his death, in full comfort of his Christian beliefs. After offering comfort to those who mourn him, the slave welcomes his death with a final condemnation of his oppressors, and a grand pronouncement of how welcome death is to all slaves:

But know, pale tyrant, ‘tis not thine
Eternal war to wage;
The death thou giv’st shall but combine
To mock thy baffled rage.

49 “Now, Christian, glut thy ravish’d eyes, / —I reach the joyful hour; / Now bid the scorching flames arise, and these poor limbs devour” (Edwards 132)
O death how welcome to th’opprest!

Thy kind embrace I crave!

Thou bring’st to mis’ry’s bosom rest,

And freedom to the slave! (Edwards 132)

These powerful lines use the emotionally evocative event to portray for a British readership how preferable death is to many of the slaves. By repeating the charge of tyranny on slaveholders, the poem demonstrates how death is preferable to a life lived in bondage, a sentiment that shapes much of the discourse on liberty for the decades proceeding revolution. Edwards also gives voice to the slaves being systematically (and in this case, literally) silenced by the practices of slavery. Although other slaves will take up the cause soon, representations of their plight by poets such Edwards do much to raise public consciousness of these individuals, and their shared humanity, but is still unwilling to push the gesture towards full abolition.  

Concerns about the incongruity of Christian values and slavery will, of course, be spread across the Anglophone colonies of the Caribbean and of continental North America by periodicals and pamphlets such as those I have traced here. Their further circulation works continuously to help redefine the poetics of liberty. In this light, liberty becomes a divine innate gift of all, casting it closer, in many regards, to the liberty described by Milton. One such poet, Philip Freneau, most well-known for his poetry on the cause of the American Revolution, would, in a longer poem cataloging “The Beauties of Santa Cruz,” condemn slavery in a manner quite akin to Edwards, elevating the slaves to equal standing with whites, and using verse to represent

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50 Edwards himself will return to this trope of the condemned slave in “Elegy on the Death of a Friend” (1764), “Ode, on Seeing a Negro Funeral” (1773) and a found poem in the spirit of Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” entitled “Inscription, over the Wicket of an Inclosed Burial-Ground for Negroes” (1776).
the slave’s human suffering: “See yonder slave that slowly bends this way, / With years, and pain, and ceaseless toil opprest, / Though no complaining words his woes betray, / The eye dejected proves the heart distrest” (Freneau 242-3). By literally putting a face on the suffering of the slaves of Santa Cruz, Freneau creates a sentiment-inspiring image of the costs of slavery that speaks to the Christian values of the colonies, particularly when noting the grace with which the slave accepts her suffering. To this image, Freneau adds a particular use of the empire of commerce discourse, explaining that, in the lust for riches, the taint of slavery has diminished the empire:

For gold accurst! For thee we madly run
With murderous hearts across the briny flood,
Seek foreign climes beneath a foreign sun,
And there exult to shed a brother’s blood.

But thou, who own’st this sugar-bearing soil,
To whom no good the First Cause denies,
Let freeborn hands attend thy sultry toil,
And fairer harvest to thy view shall rise. (Freneau 243)

The combined effect of these two stanzas is a bit confused, arguing both that greed has led to violence, but also that greed (represented by want of better harvests) is also the reason to abolish slavery. As with the poetics of liberty more broadly, this poem demonstrates a new aesthetic that incorporates economic dimensions within its cultural worth. As such, it negotiates the clashing values that inform wider affiliation, in this case, the gap between Christian values (on which the empire’s liberty is based) and slaver. Including such a direct address within the otherwise
pastoral poem shows the moral cause of Freneau’s action, and the pervasive purchase slavery had in the minds of colonists by the 1760s.

These poems, and the ongoing public discourse they represent, demonstrate the tenuous nature of liberty in the Atlantic world. As many of the great thinkers and policymakers of the age worked to maintain the economic and social systems that underwrote the imperial project, that maintenance required public discourse to refine and redirect policies continually. In this context, poems such as these and the poetics of liberty more broadly demonstrate the mediation of forms of community and affiliation that, as the eighteenth century continues, take on renewed forms and schisms. This becomes even more clear as slaves and former slaves enter into the discourse and necessitate further revision of the dynamics of affiliation.

As the publication and circulation of periodicals, broadsides and books continued to grow throughout the Anglophone colonies of North America, the general trend was towards democracy, allowing a larger and larger slice, though not a complete share, of the public to participate. For the ongoing debates over slavery, the most significant development is when that discourse expands and the voices of those directly affected by the system join the debate. For these early African-Atlantic writers, poetry becomes a genre of particular rhetorical effect, as composing verse demonstrated the intelligence, refinement, and culture of which their race had long been thought incapable. So much as slavery had worked directly to create obstacles in the education, literacy, and creativity that poetry required, the arrival of the slave poets greatly advanced the cause of abolition, reaffirming the humanity that they had long been denied. Even when not speaking against slavery, the demonstration of intelligence displayed by the slaves (or free blacks) did much to forward the argument for equality. This quality of the poetry was able to open many arenas for Williams, Hammon, and Wheatley that would have otherwise excluded
their contributions. By creating poetry that represented their own experiences, but that also took part in the established poetics of their contemporaries, the black poets were able to significantly advance their cause and reshape the poetics of liberty to finally include them and their brethren.

When examining such poems, it becomes apparent that these slaves, through the appropriation of the most elevated form (in style and conventions) of the masters’ discourse, were attempting to find a means of expression, and at least initially, such appropriation was their only option. In the case of each, the forms and conventions of their poetry demonstrate an education akin to that of many aristocratic whites, and yet their first tentative steps into poetic discourse are often imbued with a fear of their own inferiority that slavery had ingrained in them. The poems of each, in their own unique way, demonstrate a careful appropriation of the tropes and strategies I have outlined in this chapter, and show a political savvy that belies the tenuousness of their entry into the debates over slavery, and the ways in which that entry must cause further change to the traditional tropes of Atlantic poetic discourse.

Francis Williams, the first published black poet, opened up poetic discourse purely through the display of his intellect and used others’ surprise at his abilities to increase the circulation of his poems. Williams, born of free black Jamaicans around 1700, composed an array of poems about his own life and experiences across his lifetime primarily in Latin. As Basker notes, “Francis Williams may be the greatest example of black achievement in the eighteenth century” (116) as Williams would grow from his humble roots and eventually graduate from Cambridge University (thanks to the sponsorship of some wealthy whites). Williams’s poetry displays the hallmarks of this education, inflected by classicism and attuned to the poetic genres and conventions that he learned at university. Yet, as Basker notes, “As lines in his poem suggest, he eventually seemed to internalize a sense of racial inferiority that his life had
otherwise proved so unfounded” (116). While he practiced the humility that is essentially required of the black poets of the eighteenth century Atlantic, his own cultural isolation seemed to have an effect on him.

Given the context of his poetry and the quality of intellect displayed, Francis Williams was the central focus of a large debate revolving around the capacity of all Africans for learning and culture. As Vincent Carretta has recently explored in his article “Who was Francis Williams?” Williams faced intense scrutiny even before his first publication: “[Williams] was the subject of argument about the alleged inferiority of people of African descent. His extraordinariness was indisputable. Commentators with philosophical or economic vested interests in notions of so-called racial inferiority felt compelled to explain why that extraordinariness was either merely specious or at most unrepresentative” (214). Williams, as a free man composing in Latin, showed all the hallmarks of civility and refinement, yet acknowledging those fully meant calling the basis of slavery into question, something many were hesitant to do. As Carretta traces, Williams functions as a flashpoint in the larger debate for some period to come, being used in arguments for and against slavery by speakers such as David Hume, James Beattie, and his formidable political enemies Samuel Estwick and Edward Long, the latter deriding Williams in his famous *The History of Jamaica* (214-215). Long’s treatment of Williams, considered biased at best (the two had disagreements about land and inheritance), undercuts Williams’s abilities, crediting his patron more than the man himself. Quoting from Long’s history, “Francis was the youngest of three sons, and, being a boy of unusual lively parts, was pitched upon to be the subject of an experiment, which, it is said, the Duke of Montague was curious to make, in order to discover, whether, by proper cultivation, and a regular course of tuition at school and the university, a Negro might not be found as capable of literature as a
white person” (Carretta 215-216). By casting Williams’s natural ability as mere “lively parts,”
and the whole of his education as “an experiment” Long purposefully aims to unmake the step
forward Williams’s entry into public discourse represents. Carretta, basing his study on archival
records of both Williams and the legal battles he went through with Long, suggests these claims
are specious and that Williams earned many of his opportunities (even patronage) based on his
own talents (216-7). Long also included an attack on Williams’ poetic abilities by comparing
them to the work of Alexander Pope, and showing their inferiority, the goal being, as Carretta
states: “if Williams could be denied the title of poet, he could be denied the status of being fully
human” (217).

Williams’s own complicated social position as a free black from Jamaica is clearly on
display in his 1758 poem “To the Most Upright and Valiant Man, George Haldane, Esq.
Governor of the Island of Jamaica: Upon whom All Military and Moral Endowments Are
Accumulated. An Ode.” The poem argues that, in light of the Governor’s ascension, Jamaica will
experience new found peace and tranquility: “Each faction, that in evil hour began, / at your
approach are in confusion fled” (116-7). The Governor’s benign rule will end decades of strife
and rebellion, and particularly improve the lot of slaves: “Alike the master and slave shall see /
Their neck reliev’d, the yoke unbound by thee” (117) Here slavery appears to cause equal
suffering in master and slave, a questionable formulation, but perhaps best understood as the
shared burden and strife it bound to each. After praising the Governor for his military might,
Williams’s voice begins to falter, as it seems his entry into public discourse at this time requires
that he acknowledge the inferiority of his voice: “What! Shall an Aethiop touch the martial string
/ Of battles, leaders great achievements sing? / Ah No! Minerva, with the indignant nine, /
Restrain him, and forbid the bold design” (117). This curious passage at once demonstrates his
intelligence in both the artistry of the line and in its neoclassical allusions, while also
undercutting his (and his race’s) worthiness of expression, suggesting the muses would not be
willing to inspire his lines. This inferiority is echoed later when he submits his verse as a lesser
product: “Yet may you deign to accept this humble song, / Tho’ Wrapt in gloom, and from a
falt’ring tongue / Tho’ dark the stream on which the tribute flows, / Not from the skin, but from
the heart it rose” (118). This later passage suggests that despite the color of his skin, there is real
creative expression that deserves consideration. He notes that the course of liberty limits him due
to his skin color, but that there is still some worth (though lesser) in his lines. Basker suggests
that much of this anxiety was unfounded, as Williams was toured throughout Europe and read by
many Enlightenment thinkers as concrete proof of the capacity of all blacks. His entry into public
discourse, even in such a small manner, undoubtedly opened up avenues for the black poets who
followed. If nothing else, it represents the first moment when the dialectic on liberty began to
reassess the stereotypes that had allowed for the subjugation of blacks throughout the Atlantic.

The honor of being the first slave poet published in America belongs to Jupiter Hammon,
a slave who lived with a family on Long Island. Much of Hammon’s poetry is focused on his
Christian faith, the expression of which touched on such universal themes that it was published
for general consumption.51 Here, the poet uses his faith to open the avenue of publication,
making his stance palatable to a wider network of affiliations than those that might be alienated
by his skin color. His poetry that engages the topic of slavery generally encourages slaves to be
obedient and accept mastery insofar as it does not directly conflict with the values of
Christianity. This position is most directly displayed in the 1782 poem “A Dialogue; Entitled, the
Kind Master and [the] Dutiful Servant.” The poem, a discussion about the slave’s duties between

51 The first poem published by Hammon was a Christmas poem entitled “An Evening Thought. Salvation by Christ,
with Penetential Cries: Composed by Jupiter Hammon, a negro belonging to Mr. Lloyd, of Queen’s-Village, on Long-
Island, the 25th of December, 1760” (Published the following Christmas).
the two, contains a subtle rebellion by the slave, as he accepts the Master’s commands, but reserves the right to reject any orders that violate his virtues. The opening exchange of the poem reflects the triangle of relations:

1. Master.

Come my servant, follow me,
According to thy place;
And surely God will be with thee,
And send thy heavenly grace.

2. Servant.

Dear Master, I will follow thee,
According to thy word,
And pray that God may be with me,
And save thee in the Lord. (143)

Here the Master establishes himself as being aligned with God fully, and expressing the route to grace as lying in obedience. The Servant, in response, expresses more doubt, saying that he will be dutiful, but that he’ll still need to “Pray that God may be with me,” allowing that there may be space between the wishes of the Master and the divine.

As the dialogue continues, the Master and Servant continue to discuss their shared faith, with the Servant reserving more space for his own disobedience: “As far as grace and truth’s in sight, / Thus far I’ll surely go” (143). Dutiful still, the Servant yet allows Hammon to make clear the hierarchy of forces that should govern a slave’s life. Late in the poem, Hammon intervenes into the dialogue himself, explaining once more that because masters are corruptible by human
greed, servants should stay true to God: “Believe me now my Christian friends, / Believe your friend call’d HAMMON: / You cannot to your God attend, / And serve the God of Mammon” (145). This intervention makes plain the conflict between greed and Christianity that was present throughout the poetics of liberty in the New World and often used as a means of authorizing the British Empire (and denigrating the competing Spanish). Whereas so often Britain distinguished itself from Spain by asserting liberty over greed, here Hammon reverses this trope, warning that the British are at risk of erring into greed (a sentiment not unlike that expressed in Freneau’s later poem examined above). In this way, Hammon cloaks his poem in the familiar garb of other discourses and makes a compelling case for the limitations of slavery and the ways in which its current state may contravene Christian morals. While Hammon’s definitions of liberty sustain slavery within them, they also make it clear that the growing disparity is putting their cohesion at risk.

Phillis Wheatley’s entry into the public discourse on slavery, through verse carefully modeled after canonical poets, demonstrated a new approach to interpreting the slave experience. As her print debut above demonstrates, Wheatley writes poems of occasional nature that, by virtue of their creation, help to redefine slave subjectivity and challenge the dominant stereotypes of the period. In Wheatley’s poetry, the tropes of the poetics of liberty, having been broken down in light of the realities of slavery, are reassembled to present her voice through the tropes of the master class. Her debut volume, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral uses a variety of genres to assert both the innate intelligence of the poetess and the rich neoclassical education she procured through the family that owned her. Clearly inspired by the works of Milton, Pope, and other well-known poets, Wheatley’s verse often uses pastoral modes and classical allusions

52 Notably, the image that adorned Wheatley’s volume shows the poet in a pose that directly resembles a 1752 engraving of Milton being visited by Melancholy that circulated in a volume containing Milton’s shorter poems.
to mark specific occasions, argue for moral or religious acts, and/or enter into contemporary political debates (both general and pertaining to slavery). Recent work on Wheatley’s poetry and biography has turned particular scrutiny toward the exact circumstances that allowed Wheatley to enter public discourse, challenging long-held narratives of the process through which Wheatley’s volume of poems was originally published. When published in 1773, Wheatley’s volume included a variety of prefatory materials intended to verify the authorship of her verse, and also attest to the fact that Wheatley was of African birth. These materials included a letter from her master, John Wheatley, which attributes her language abilities to the innate quality of her character: “Without any Assistance from School Education, and by only what she was taught in the Family, she, in sixteen Months Time from her arrival, attained the English Language, to which she was an utter Stranger before, to such a Degree as to read and, the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings, to the great astonishment of all who heard her” (7). John Wheatley’s statement, meant to attest both to her birth and her writing ability, shows that Phillis’s first entry into public discourse relied on the authority of her master, but also was fueled by the novelty her readers saw in poetry being produced by a slave. This is further expanded by another prefatory letter addressed “To the Publick,” that attests to Phillis’s authorship: “WE whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few YEARS since, brought an uncultivated barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town” (8). The pledge, signed by eighteen people of renown in Boston (including the Governor and Lieutenant-Governor), is reproduced in the book and offered as a legal document, with the original available for viewing at the bookseller’s shop. The use of “uncultivated barabarian” is intended to again emphasize how far
the poet has come in her learning, while the “disadvantage of serving” further demonstrate that, given these hindrances, her poetry is even more remarkable, but still requires that a circle of privileged speakers authorize her participation in public discourse.

The circumstances through which Wheatley obtained the signatures and that authorization has been the focus of debate. Henry Louis Gates, in “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes,” presents a somewhat fictionalized scenario in which the young Wheatley had to appear in front of a tribunal called for the specific purpose of determining her intelligence and abilities (7-8). The account, which is meant to represent the incongruence of eighteenth-century learning and the myth of black ignorance, is used to show how Wheatley needed white authorization in order to join public discourse. However, this account has recently been proven false, as scholars trace historical court records and find no such event. In “Our Phillis, Ourselves,” Joanna Brooks argues that no single event was used to obtain the attestation, but instead, Wheatley was relying on a circle of (primarily female) social connections to circulate her manuscripts and then later attest to their authorship. As Brooks notes, “Wheatley succeeded by appealing to the feelings of women, most of them white, who in turn hand-copied and circulated her manuscripts, bought and sold her books, organized, hosted, promoted, and attended her domestic poetry performances, and commissioned from her original poems on subjects close to the heart” (8). As Brooks argues, this set of associations was founded in the specific acts of mourning and celebration that Wheatley helped these women mark, by contributing poetry for the specific occasion. Beyond this, contributing in this manner helped Wheatley not only display her learning and refinement, but also overturn another myth about slaves and emotion: “It also may have been that she was able to demonstrate her own capacity for emotional work, contesting racist eighteenth-century notions of African Americans as people
constitutionally incapable of ascertaining certain forms of feeling” (15). By operating around specific occasions, Wheatley’s poetry was first accepted by this circle of women because of its empathetic and sentimental dimensions, and Wheatley was able to then expand her participation in wider issues of debate. Moving from the occasional to the general, Wheatley’s individual trajectory mirrors that of the larger political participation of poets. She relies on the articulation of ideas and the artistry of her lines to expand her audience and effect.

Wheatley’s poetry, while of her own unique voice, is also directly related to the dominant aesthetics of her day, and the poetics that govern the intervention of such poetry in the larger political debates of the period. If the poetics of liberty cannot account for the reality of slavery, Wheatley is left to construct her own aesthetic, reimagining the tropes that still hold rhetorical purchase, and finding new means to express her condition. John Shields, in *Phillis Wheatley’s Poetics of Liberation*, argues that this new aesthetic must be read through a fundamentally interdisciplinary lens: “my approach to Wheatley’s work, both her poems and her letters, but especially her poems, demands interdisciplinary pluralism. Close reading of this artist must address the issues that recur in her work, those of the historical moment, personal biography, the literary aesthetics of her day, psychology, politics, sociology, and philosophy” (17). While this is true of any artist, Wheatley’s historical situation adds greater weight to the detail of the context into which her work is entered. Given the heightened scrutiny of her work, understanding how it engages this array of disciplines is an important means of understanding its engagement with discourse. Using this approach, Shields concludes that Wheatley’s poetry is best understood as “throughout permeated by the dialectic of slavery versus freedom” (17) and that that dialectic holds within it a variety of tensions that define Wheatley’s cultural position including conflicts between “things as they are (wholly unethical) and thing as they should be (preferably ethical),”
“her life as it is lived and the life of her imagination,” and “disorder versus order, as manifested by the chaotic society of Boston” (17). These tensions, expressed within the regular lines and structure of Wheatley’s couplets, demonstrate an engagement with the larger public, finding a means of political expression founded in the terms of that ongoing debate. My own approach to Wheatley’s poetry, while attempting to follow Shields’s model, situates her work in the larger reconfiguration of the poetics of liberty that expands that discourse in order to encompass her story and the freedom she seeks.

Wheatley employs the conventions of the pastoral genre and neoclassicism in order to display her learning and skill to earn entry into political discourse, but, in doing so, must recast narratives to unwrite their racial biases. This is most clear in her opening poem, “To Maecenas,” which uses these tools in tribute of her patron and to authorize the discourse to follow via its artistic worth and refinement. Invoking her patron, Wheatley announces her poetic role in clear pastoral terms: “Maecenas, you, beneath the myrtle shade, / Read o’er what poets sung, and shepherds play’d. / What felt those poets but you feel the same?” (9). Subtly suggesting the universality of such inspiration, Wheatley becomes a poet amongst tradition, though separate. Both her classical education and humble attitude work here to authorize her verse, both showing her deference to others, and demonstrating her refinement. Like the other slave poets, she works to delicately establish her worth but must also acknowledge her lower station (per the dynamics of public discourse in her time). In the second stanza, Wheatley similarly shows her humility, offering that at the thought of composing grand poetry “A deep-felt horror thrills through all my veins.” Like Williams, Wheatley seems to fear the inferiority of her voice, must excuse its weaknesses as she attempts her verse, and must create a new rhetorical position from which to speak. Later in the poem, Wheatley argues for her own poetry by invoking a branch of poetic
discourse that unites her with the classical, notably bypassing the English poets to whom she owes her style and form:

    The Happier Terence of all the choir inspir’d
    His soul replenish’d, and his bosom fir’d;
    But say ye Muses, why this partial grace,
    To one alone of Afric’s sable race;
    From age to age transmitting thus his name
    With the first glory in the rolls of fame? (10)

Citing a first century Roman writer of comedies who was of African descent alongside Homer and Virgil allows Wheatley to argue for the equality of her own poetic mind. To any of her readers that may question the ability of her race, she shows that she is not the first, and that such gifts have been with her race since the classical age. Shields, in defining his own use of the term classicism, describes Wheatley’s approach as aligning with the majority of Early America: “her poetics include a palpable determination to consult classical sources, usually bypassing British ones, in order to construct her own versions, for example, of pastoral, pastoral elegy, and epic” (19). By constructing her own tradition that is tied to the classical, Wheatley uses her unique version of Milton’s dual vision to explore the tension between her own world and the world as it should be. Just as justifications of empire were rooted in the figure of liberty marching from the classical age to Britain, Wheatley demonstrates her own capacity by drawing the path of art through Africa.

    Wheatley’s own direct representations of liberty and freedom, while powerful in their inception alone, use gestures towards the shared human condition to cast her experiences in terms that are understood by her audience. In “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of
DARTMOUTH,” Wheatley presents her dialectic of freedom and slavery plainly, demonstrating how her own slavery has led her to appreciate that freedom all the more. Like Pope, Milton, and other neoclassical poets, Wheatley uses allegorical figures to express the struggle, presenting “fair Freedom” to show how the hope of such liberty rises and falls in the poet: “Hail, happy day, when, smiling like the morn, / Fair Freedom rose New-England to adorn: / The northern clime beneath her genial ray, / Dartmouth, congratulates thy blissful sway (39). Endowing the allegory with a clear sense of place (and a reference to the addressee), Wheatley merges the abstracted value and the occasion. Yet, no sooner has Freedom arisen then she perishes: “Soon as appear’d the Goddess long desir’d, / Sick at the view, she languish’d and expir’d;” (40). The even lines of pentameter march steadily to bring order to the chaos represented. The heartbreaking image of the hope of freedom rising and falling anew each day demonstrates the elusiveness of the liberty to the enslaved. To Wheatley each morning brings hope and then heartbreak in short order, and the imagery of light and darkness points to the cause. The allegory shows both the limits and potential of freedom in America.

Wheatley’s meditation on freedom continues, as she uses her position to express to others the suffering slavery has caused in her and others. Yet, lest her readership find the experience to alienating, she casts the loss of liberty in the human terms of family, emphasizing pain to evoke emotion:

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
    Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,
    Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
    By Feeling hearts alone best understood,
    I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatch’d from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent’s breast?
Steel’d was the soul and by no misery mov’d
That from a father seiz’d his babe belov’d:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway? (40)

Wheatley’s capacity for representing emotion is clear, as her juxtaposition of “happy seat” and “pangs excruciating” turns the poem towards the emotional cost of slavery, where “sorrows” and “misery” dominate. By emphasizing the pains of her parents, she expresses the larger topic with immediate emotion, helping her audience understand the human cost of slavery. The final turn of the stanza pushes the high role of faith, showing that she bears no ill will for those that enslaved her, instead only wishing that others might not have to suffer further. While these lines still evoke emotion, in the audience of white elite eighteenth-century Bostonians, they would have made slavery visible in terms that evoke the emotions of the elegies that connected her to the social circles, and evoked great sympathy. In this way the poem innovates the poetics of liberty to locate the subject within the larger system and make clear the human cost of empire, and the absence of liberty for so many.

By bringing Christianity and faith into the poetics of liberty, Wheatley exposes the hypocrisy found throughout the poetics of liberty wherein those that espouse freedom are often, with their other hand, binding others to captivity. While done with a subtle hand, this work helps to expose contradiction and points towards freedom for all as the only sure way for liberty to reign. One of Wheatley’s most contested poems in this regard is the short “On being brought
from AFRICA to AMERICA,” which uses similar imagery to argue for the worthiness of her race for such liberty:

‘TWAS mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,

Taught my benighted soul to understand

That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too:

Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,

“Their colour is a diabolic die”

Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,

May be refin’d and join th’angelic train. (13)

The brief poem, offering Wheatley’s thoughts on what her enslavement has brought her, appears to show gratitude toward those that enslave her. While some critics have charged it with supporting slavery, a more careful reading of the lines suggests a subtle protest against the practices. Many of the differences of interpretation rely on the emphasis read into the first line. While the poet has capitalized ‘twas, and italicized pagan, the intended inflection on mercy is less clear. Some critics (including Basker) suggest that the line is meant to emphasize mercy as a way of displacing the slaver, making their hands invisible just as others have treated slaves. In this reading, Wheatley attributes the divine with salvation despite the suffering that the move has brought her. Without the emphasis, the poem seems to praise slavery outright, but if mercy (and the divine) are what is being paid tribute, and the slaver is made invisible, then the poem becomes a tribute to the mysterious ways of faith and a forward path through mercy. This seems more in line with the tone the poem shows later, when casting off the condemnation of blackness as a “diabolic die.”
The poem’s final couplet demonstrates how Wheatley was able to reconfigure the tropes of liberty in order to argue for the end of slavery. Employing the language of commerce (particularly through the pun on Cain), Wheatley argues for the inherent worth of her people and suggests that, because of their potential for “refinement,” they are deserving of more respect. The positioning of Christians and Negros (as well as italicizing both) offers an indictment of the Christian values that slaveholders possess, and once again claims shared humanity by suggesting that all may find redemption equally. Folding together tropes of heroic commerce and *translatio studii* allows Wheatley to demonstrate the pure hypocrisy of claiming to spread learning while purposefully excluding slaves from the rights inherent in liberty. In this sense, Wheatley is using the established language of liberty and faith in order to build a case against slavery and, with a gentle hand, advance the cause of her people.

As Wheatley worked to redefine the poetics of liberty for slaves in America, the larger tide of discourse soon became more concerned with the economic and political relations of America and England and the march towards revolution soon drowned out voices calling for abolition (at least temporarily). The eighteenth century, which had seen the explosion of both a discourse on liberty and the buying and selling of enslaved Africans, was unable to resolve the tension or find a means of defining liberty that could reconcile slavery within it. As nation rose to replace empire, and a new foundation for democracy founded in liberty was sought, the contradictions between this discourse and slavery would remain. Understanding the tradition of poetry of slavery within the larger discourse on liberty, as I have traced here, allows us to see the purchase the poetics of liberty had in the minds of poets and their readership throughout the period. The incongruity that existed was continually processed, with those both for and against slavery’s practice articulating their views in the established terms in hopes of convincing others.
This work, intrinsically embedded yet necessarily separate from the discourse on empire, remains a part of the legacy of the Enlightenment. As citizens in North America turned from empire to nation, the debate remained and represented a constant crosscurrent in the flow of liberty that public discourse celebrated, demonstrating another continuity that unites discourse across the political ruptures of the period.
In 1784, Phillis Wheatley, now Phillis Peters, having married after being emancipated by the Wheatley family, published a poem in celebration of the political victories of the revolution and in anticipation of the great freedoms that the new order could bring. “Liberty and Peace, A Poem” was published in a pamphlet, and is one of the final extant poems from Wheatley’s career, as she succumbed to illness later in 1784, after the imprisonment and death of her husband, which left her in financial ruin. In the early years after the revolution, Wheatley saw a great promise for the spread of liberty and freedom throughout America, and frames her poem as a tribute to those values:

LO! Freedom comes. Th’prescient Muse foretold,
All Eyes th’accomplish’d Prophecy behold:

Her Port describ’d, “She moves divinely fair,
Olive and Laurel bind her golden Hair.”

She, the bright Progeny of Heaven, descends,
And every Grace her sovereign Step attends;
For now kind Heaven, indulgent to our Prayer,
In smiling Peace resolves the din of War. (101)

Wheatley’s lines, which quote her own rhyme from “To His Excellency George Washington,” use a careful neoclassical image to present the revolution as the coming of allegorical Freedom to reign over America. Freedom, like Liberty in James Thomson’s poem, has descended from heaven and marched through time to settle in America. Using this typology, Wheatley works to rewrite the stock trope of the poetics of liberty in order to distinguish the nascent American
nation from England and characterize the new republic as being the rightful and true seat of liberty and freedom.

The revolution, and the political and social changes it brought to the United State, has traditionally been cast as one of the greatest points of rupture in literature. It has been used primarily as the starting point of American Literature and a period of separation and difference that would permeate both British and American literature for decades, or, in some estimations, over a century to follow. While such perspectives are continually challenged, especially by the scholars of the Atlantic, their dominance remains a quick shorthand for national heuristics and for periodization. However, when examining the public political discourse of the century, it becomes clear that the revolution, having grown organically from the dialectic on liberty, as colonists recognized the inherent conflict between empire and liberty, is codified within the poetics of liberty as a period of change and transition, but not as a rupture. That is, while the dialectic on liberty is affected by these political events, the symbolic language, the vocabulary through which political subjectivity is articulated, remains consistent across the revolution. The arguments change, but the foundation on which they are built is remarkably similar. As empire became nation, and British colonists became American citizens, poets seeking to represent this transformation turned to the poetics of liberty in order to use its signifying power to capture the emerging values of the young nation. Just as the poets of the Atlantic World used a variety of tropes to separate Britain from its contemporary imperial competitors and also from the empires of antiquity, poets in America, from the Revolution through the American Renaissance, will turn to the same tropes to separate the United States from Britain.

Wheatley’s poem, as the opening above demonstrates, makes use of her neoclassical style, which itself is akin to Milton’s dual vision, in order to establish the United States as the
next stage in the march of Freedom through society. In both her style and form, Wheatley echoes Milton and Pope and taps into their aesthetics, effectively bypassing the colonial period in order to align her nation with the purer form of British Liberty that once reigned, before greed corrupted its values. Proceeding from that opening, Wheatley’s poem is a tour de force of the poetics of liberty, as she rallies the full array of tropes in order to establish the new nation. The effect, through the careful recasting of each trope, is to present a revision of the whole discourse of liberty, appropriating the dialectic to show how it has (perhaps always, perhaps inevitably) been pointed towards this moment and this nation. This begins by her first turning towards the empire of commerce tropes in the lines that immediately follow the opening:

Fix’d in *Columbia* her illustrious Line,

And bids in thee her future Councils shine.

To every Realm her Portals open’d wide,

Receives from each her full commercial Tide.

Each Art and Science now with rising Charms

Th’ expanding Heart with Emulation warms. (101)

America, presented here and throughout as Columbia, is first characterized by the commercial power that will finally operate freely, released from the exploitative practices of empire. By implicitly invoking the economic conflicts that ignited the Revolution, Wheatley first celebrates the promise that such commerce will bring to the nation. The oceanic imagery of “Portals” and “her full commercial Tide” draw from the empire of the seas to establish the heroic nature of commerce, while the final couplet authorizes that commercial power through *translatio studii*, arguing that “Art and Science” will follow in the wake of the commercial ships even more freely than they had under British rule (“rising charms”), improving all citizens. Her authorization of
the nation fully echoes that of the poets writing fifty years earlier in support of the imperial cause.

Wheatley’s poem shows a keen awareness of the heritage of imperial poetry that she is attempting to unwrite and/or reinterpret to be a poem of nation. If the authorizing myths of the British Empire were the spread of liberty (and arts and learning) and of England as the New Rome, Wheatley has to address these and offer her own national interpretation of those same dynamics. In the lines that follow, Wheatley describes how America will soon surpass Britain in naval might and bounty, through which, and with a sustained commitment to law and liberty, America will assume the mantle of the new Rome:

E’en great Britannia sees with dread Surprize,
And from the dazzl’ing Splendors turns her eye!

Britain, whose Navies swept th’Atlantic o’er,
And Thunder sent to every distant Shore:

E’en thou, in Manners cruel as thou art,
The Sword resign’d, resume the friendly Part!

For Galia’s Power espous’d Columbia’s Cause,
And new-born Rome shall give Britannia Law, (101)

Drawing contrast between America and Britain, Wheatley emphasizes how each used their navies. While brutal Britain brought war across the realm, America will bring only “dazzl’ing Splendors.” But Wheatley is careful to temper the depiction with a note on how the reign of Freedom is going to ensure peace fully, letting this conflict be settled now that England “The Sword resign’d.” Here the final lines, which demonstrate Wheatley’s awareness of the role France (Galia) played in ending the conflict, emphasize how, as the rightful inheritor of Roman
law, America will remain civil towards their former oppressors and bring justice through their influence. By casting America as the new Rome, Wheatley not only rewrites a trope of imperial propaganda, but argues that the cause of civility and learning has now passed across the Atlantic.

The poem’s final lines are committed to elevating the United States from the rubble of war and into the pantheon of imperial powers that dominate the sea and control the realms of commerce. Returning to the figure of Freedom, Wheatley repeats the gestures towards commerce as she presents the tableau of world powers which now includes the free and independent Columbia:

So Freedom comes array’d with Charms divine,
And in her Train Commerce and Plenty shine.

Brittania owns her Independent Reign

Hibernia, Scotia, and the Realms of Spain;

And great Germania’s ample coast admires

The generous Spirit that Columbia fires.

Auspicious Heaven shall fit with fav’ring Gales,

Where e’er Columbia spreads her swelling Sails:

To every Realm shall Peace her charms display,

And Heavenly Freedom spread her golden Ray. (102)

The gesture, like many of the imperiographic texts of the period, shows the awareness Wheatley has of the nations at work throughout the Atlantic and presents an image of them all operating in peace towards mutual benefit, in a manner that inherently exceeds the workings of empire by lessening the exploitation of one people for another. But the “Generous Spirit” of the nation, unlike that of empire, works as a constituent, and through its spirit and influence, but not its
control, sees all gain through coordinated systems of commerce. The final image, operating both literally and figuratively, envisions divine sanctions upon America’s ships, which will bring freedom to every realm. By imagining America as a ship, Wheatley celebrates the work of the nation to promote freedom, while leaving the inequalities of her race and gender aside, either in light of the celebratory occasion, or by optimistically implying that freedom will continue her march internally as a part of its continued outward influence.

As in the poetry of empire, ships are an important symbol to American poets, both in how they are bound up in commerce, but also for the freedom and liberty they represent. Beyond this, the symbol of the ship derives its significance from the idea of the rag-tag crew of renegades and misfits working together, in unison, to accomplish the workings of the ship, a direct metaphor for first the revolution, and later for the union’s growing tension in the decades leading to the Civil War. The most iconic poem of the second category is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “The Building of the Ship,” first published in his 1849 collection, The Seaside and the Fireside. The poem, which typifies Longfellow’s lyrical tone and memorable rhyming rhythm, uses the construction of a ship as a metaphor for the building of the union, and the tests it must face. 53 The poem opens with the request for the ship, notably spoken by “the merchant,” which first presents the refrain that will repeat throughout the poem:

“Build me straight, O Worthy Master!
Stanch and Strong, a goodly vessel,
That shall laugh at all disaster,
And with wave and whirlwind wrestle”

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53 Longfellow, another poet with a “dual vision,” often drew from the classical world to authorize a poem’s political intervention. Here, he is linking ship and state in a manner akin to Plato in The Republic and Horace in his Ode (Dana 210).
The merchant’s word

Delighted the Master heard;

For his heart was in his work, and the heart

Giveth grace unto every Art. (99)

The ship, at once of commerce and of nation, is presented first through two key qualities: its superior construction and its ability to tame nature. These specific values, while drawing off the inherited tropes of the empire of the sea, are also recasting the image of heroic commerce to include not only the sailors and merchants who enable commerce, but also to include the workers and craftsman whose work creates the vessels. The nobility of the Master is defined by his devotion to his work, which Longfellow generalizes to others in the final line, reminding us of the link between art and (in this case) nation.

Following Pope’s model in “Windsor-Forest,” Longfellow uses lumber and trees to adapt the conventions of pastoral poetry to the world of the sea and ships, endowing the ship of union he is constructing with the bounty of the natural world, and the many regions of the United States. The image first appears as the Master and workmen begin gathering the resources needed to build the ship:

Covering many a rood of ground,

Lay the timber piled around;

Timber of chestnut, and elm, and oak,

And scattered here and there, with these,

The knarred and crooked cedar knees;

Brought from region’s far away,

From Pascagoula’s sunny bay,
And the banks of the roaring Roanoke! (100)

The passage praises the bounty of the natural world, but makes clear that it is in its employment in service of the ship that such resources find their true worth. Beyond this, the ship being created is superior to those of other nations because of the variety the lands offer to aid in construction, as each timber fits a suited purpose. The lines specifically reference Mississippi’s Pascagoula Bay and Virginia’s Roanoke, drawing both into the northern industrial complex. As the stanza goes on to make clear, “But every climate, every soil, / Must bring its tribute, great or small, / And help to build the wooden wall!” Such gestures tint the empire of the seas with an imperiographic tone, demonstrating the poet’s knowledge of these rich expanses, but also how nation can effectively organize and regulate its constituent peoples and regions to mutual effect. This gesture is repeated when the Master next speaks, giving instructions to his apprentice:

Choose the timbers with greatest care;

Of all that is unsound beware;

For only what is sound and strong

To this vessel shall belong.

Cedar of Maine, and Georgia pine

Here together shall combine.

A goodly frame, and a goodly fame,

And the UNION be her name! (100).

By drawing across the nation and again emphasizing unity, Longfellow anoints the ship with the full power of its name, which works to represent the ship, the nation, and also the relationship of the apprentice and the Master’s daughter, giving the imagery a forward-pointed vision towards
the generations to follow. While drawing on tradition to articulate his argument, the focus is on the nation of his contemporary moment, and the looming crisis of disunity.

Once the ship is named, all discussion of it becomes a celebration of America and its peoples. However, when the pastoral imagery makes one further appearance, wherein the work of commerce and the workmen is used to craft a political message. Longfellow imbues the harvest of the mast with a clear endorsement of the nation, and more specifically of democracy and the end of monarchy. Writing at their installation, Longfellow presents each mast as a fallen king:

Long Ago,
In the deer-haunted forests of Maine,
When upon mountain and plain
Lay the snow,
They fell,—those lordly pines!
Those grand majestic pines!
‘Mid shouts and cheers
And jaded steers,
Panting beneath the goad,
Dragged down the weary winding road
Those captive kings, so straight and tall,
To be shorn of their streaming hair,
And naked and bare,
To feel the stress and the strain
Of the wind and the reeling main,
Whose roar
Would remind them forevermore
Of their native forests they shall not see again. (102)

This lengthy passage again shows the transition from the beauty of the forest to the industry of the sea, but in a somewhat darker tone. The forest is “deer-haunted” and the road is “weary,” while the pines themselves are destined to be “shorn” before feeling “the stress and the strain” that will always remind them of their lost native forests. These descriptions of the “captive kings” demonstrate how what is “lordly” is not excepted from the work of nation. Contrasted with empire, what matters here are the utility of all and the contributions they must make to the working of the nation.

However, the installation of the masts, from these dark roots, is recovered in the new symbolic power that they will have throughout the world. In the stanza that follows their harvest, that new role is articulated through the language of union:

And everywhere
The slender, graceful spars
Poise aloft in the air,
And at the mast-head,
White, blue, and red,
A flag unrolls the stripes and stars.
Ah! When the wanderer, lonely, friendless,
In foreign harbors shall behold
That flag unrolled,
’T will be as a friendly hand
Stretched out from his native land,

Filling his heart with memories sweet and endless! (102)

While the pines experience a longing for their forest, the flag they support provides a connection between others who miss their “native land” while abroad. That “friendly hand” is the symbol of union that assures those who wander of their home. This further revises Pope’s imagery by not just praising the ships synecdochically through the masts, but also writing them into the growing influence of America in the “foreign harbors” through which the nation acts. This is then fully realized in the poem’s final benediction (“Thou too, sail on, O Ship of State! / Sail on, O UNION, strong and great!” 103), which weaves together these images with the language of industry and commerce to promote the ship’s grace and superiority. Longfellow’s ship is the nation, bound together in “Our hearts, our hopes, our prayers, our tears, / Our faith triumphant o’er our fears” (103). Through the increased emphasis on democracy here and throughout, Longfellow transforms the ships of empire into the ships of nation, and offers his own endorsement of union amidst the growing tensions that would lead to the Civil War.

While Longfellow’s poem demonstrates the further evolution of the poetics of liberty, it must also be noted that it demonstrates the evolving role of poetry in public discourse. In the decades between Wheatley’s poem and Longfellow’s, poetry had become a matter of public performance, and Longfellow, more than any other figure, enjoyed the celebrity that it endowed. “The Building of the Ship of State,” was well received by Longfellow’s adoring public, and quickly became a favorite for public recitation and personal contemplation. There’s evidence that, while the poem’s metaphor for union had always been planned, the final optimistic tone was only created at the last minute to replace a darker more pessimistic vision of the ship rotting on the pier (as all ships must eventually). As the poet’s nephew Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana...
argues, the last minute change, created just as The Seaside and The Fireside went to print, was inspired by Longfellow’s increased worry at the state of the union, and the role he knew he must play as a public figure: “Mr. Longfellow had been stirred by the growing crisis in 1849 to assert a new faith in the Union already threatened with secession by the South” (211). Citing the gold rush, and the “free soil” vs. “slave soil” conflict, Dana goes on to suggest that the poem’s new ending represents the poet’s further turn towards the work of abolition. In this context, the poem’s musical lines must also be viewed as a political argument, and the allusions to Mississippi, Georgia, and Virginia hold greater meaning. Longfellow not only endorses union, but presents it as the embedded quality in the nation that will keep it afloat “In spite of rock and tempest’s roar, / In spite of false lights on the shore” (203).

The introduction to the “The Building of the Ship,” from the 1886 The Complete Poetical Works of Longfellow suggests that the imagery and aesthetic qualities of the poem found great purchase in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Citing Mr. Noah Brooks in an article on “Lincoln’s Imagination,” the introduction recounts Lincoln’s fondness for the poem, and particularly the final stanza. As Brooks recounts, “As he listened to the last lines, his eyes filled with tears, and his cheeks were wet” (Longfellow, 98). President Lincoln’s (purported) eventual reaction, “It is a wonderful gift to be able to stir men like that,” demonstrates the potency poetry still held in the minds and imaginations of nineteenth century figures. Further, as Dana relates, the poem was used by Franklin Roosevelt in a letter to Winston Churchill on the advent of the Second World War, meant to spark warm relations with the British Lord of the Admiralty (214). Thus, the vision of nation articulated in the poem proves central to the evolving conceptions of nation that held purchase from the American Renaissance forward, and the gestures once used by the poet to distinguish America from Britain became a means of drawing the two together. This
demonstrates that, through a careful understanding of the poetics of liberty, we are better able to understand the political ideas embedded in the literature at the heart of American culture. While Longfellow’s poetry continues to rise and fall in popularity within literary criticism, few would denigrate its significance in public discourse, and later education, and the effect it had on shaping American identity.

As the nineteenth century continued, more poets took up Emerson’s call in “American Scholar” to create a literature worthy of the nation, and find a means through which to express America’s unique position in the world. While an examination of how this next generation of poets and authors (notably Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, and Thoreau) made use of the poetics of liberty is outside the scope of this project, I will close here by briefly touching on Walt Whitman, and his use of the poetics of liberty to articulate a new definition of self, nation, and democracy through liberty. In all its varied editions, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, in thematic and generic dimensions, represents the articulation of a specifically American subjectivity through a new interpretation of poetic conventions, and the common tropes of the poetics of liberty. The central focus of Whitman’s verse, especially in the poem that will eventually be titled “Song of Myself” is to express his own “multitudes” and the ways in which that self is informed by and informs the larger concept of nation. In the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, this is a decidedly American political poem, as he announces his subject in the opening of his preface, writing the nation into the course of history: “America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions…accepts the lesson with calmness…is not so important as has been supposed that the slough still sticks to opinions and matters of literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms” (616). The argument is both political and literary, noting that the American
subjectivity is sensitive to the past, but eager to create new social and literary forms in order to capture the American spirit. Setting himself at the forefront of these efforts, Whitman offers the thesis behind his ranging fragmentary form, arguing that the great American poets must encompass all within their forms as “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (616) and that “Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most needs poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest” (619). While this “poetical stuff” is imbued with an understanding of its heritage, it must further advance the cause to find this “new life of the new forms.”

In order to project this American subjectivity, Whitman must transform the poetics of liberty through the creativity of his new form. In generic terms, this is best understood as a compendium of lyrics, each paying tribute to the self, nature, democracy, common people, and more, which, when assembled, create an epic that, as Whitman himself notes, embodies the United States as “not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations” (616). The poem takes as its purpose not just to present the poet and his worldview, but to catalog the peoples and places of America, weaving them all into the verse of the poem and enfolding them within the nation just as the imperiographic poems folded nations into empire.

Speaking of the great American poet to come, Whitman notes that their attention must focus surely on the common peoples of the nation, and on the beauty of their common works, which is where democracy is found:

To him the hereditary countenance descends both mother’s and father’s. To him enter the essence of real things and past and present events—of the enormous diversity of temperature and agriculture and mines—the tribes of red aborigines—the weatherbeaten vessels entering new ports or making landings on rocky
coasts—the first settlements north or south—the rapid structure and muscle—the haughty defiance of ’76, and the war and peace and formation of the constitution…the union always surrounded by blatherers and always calm and impregnable—the perpetual coming of immigrants—the wharf hem’d cities and superior marine—the unsurveyed interior—the loghouses and clearings and wild animals and hunters and trappers…the free commerce—the fisheries and whaling and golddigging—the endless gestation of new states—the convening of Congress every December, the members duly coming up from all climates and the uttermost parts. …the noble character of the young mechanics and of all free American workmen and workwomen (619).

Within the fragmentary cataloging, Whitman holds an array of ideals in tension, calling up both commerce and the empire of the seas in service of tracing the poet in history and in the people of the nation. As in the Longfellow poem, the emphasis is on the union, and its remarkable nature that brings together North and South, the metropolitan and the rural, and the Congress and the mechanics. Whitman asserts the nobility of all as a part of the democratic enterprise, praising the self-sufficient hunters and fisherman as highly as he does all who operate freely.

About midway through the preface, in his continued articulation of America’s poetical nature, Whitman turns directly to the concept of liberty as a means of further elevating the common man. Whitman envisions a liberty that simultaneously challenges “the great masters” and “takes the adherence of heroes wherever men and women exist….but never takes any adherence or welcome from the rest more than from poets. They are the voice and exposition of liberty” (627). Claiming a special place for the value within the work of poets, Whitman then articulates the role poets have in its further spread, “to cheer up slaves and horrify despots”
This recognition of poetry’s role in the definition and evolution of liberty demonstrates Whitman’s attention to the ways in which his own poetry continues the work of others, advancing the cause, and giving it a particular American slant by giving voice to those slaves who suffer from lack of liberty. As he further describes, this work of the poet is particularly didactic: “Come nigh them awhile and though they never speak or advise you shall learn the faithful American lesson” (627). The poet must teach and instruct, advancing liberty by voicing the voiceless, a sentiment he will repeat in the opening poem. His final note on liberty acknowledges that, despite these lofty intentions, the way of liberty is set independent of any individuals: “Liberty relies upon itself, invites no one, promises nothing, sits in calmness and light, is positive and composed, and knows no discouragement” (627-8). Like the figure marching across time, the cause continues and liberty advances with and without the aid of the poet.

All of these values described by Whitman in his preface are put into practice in the opening poem of the volume. The 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass contained twelve poems, with the first poem taking up roughly half of the volume’s length. The first poem, here titled “Poem of Walt Whitman, an American,” consciously holds the individual and the nation in its sights, trying to situate the individual in the nation, trace the contours of that relationship, and find the overlaps in such distinctions. The poem’s means of doing this is to present a vast array of vistas and characters through fragments arranged mosaically to represent the individual and the nation. This transcription of the nation onto the self allows Whitman to meditate on liberty and democracy writ small, often onto his body, and writ large, encompassing the multitudes of

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54 This poem undergoes many revisions in subsequent editions, becoming just “Walt Whitman” in the 1860 edition, and finally “Song of Myself” in 1881.
himself and the nation. Amongst these fragments are every constituent nation within the nation, and the poet often pauses to catalog them anew, as in the following lines:

The pure contralto sings in the organloft,

The carpenter dresses his plank….the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp,

The married and the unmarried children ride home to their thanksgiving dinner,

The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down a strong arm,

The mate stands braced in the whaleboat, lance and harpoon are ready.

The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,

The deacons ordained with cross hands at the altar,

The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel,

The farmer stops by the bars of a Sunday and looks at the oats and rye,

The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirmed case, (lines 257-266)

The catalog, which continues at some length, finds the nobility in the story of each citizen. This is no longer the grand sweep of traditional epic, or the cataloging that occurs as great warriors prepare for battle. Instead, Whitman celebrates the beauty of the mundane, expanding heroic commerce to a nearly infinite degree.

Whitman turns more directly to democracy later in the poem, announcing himself as “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,” (498). The title makes him both of
the people and of the infinite, seer and sage, able to speak as the common man, but in tune with
the transcendent truths that nature reveals to the man. It is this position that authorizes Whiman
(and poetry by extension) to intervene in all matters, working to ensure equality and liberty for
all Americans: “I speak the password primeval….I give the sign of democracy; / By God! I will
accept nothing which all cannot have their / counterpart of on the same terms” (508-9). Casting
democracy as something ancient and true, Whitman speaks to the poetic tradition and how it
authorizes the poet to speak throughout the poem. Whitman makes this specific with a brief
catalog of who he is empowered to speak for:

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of slaves,
Voices of prostitutes and deformed persons,
Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
And of the threads that connect the stars (509-514).

Whitman’s democracy, in its willingness to cast itself on those who are most ignored by the
society, is perhaps the most complete expression of liberty from across the period. While not
advocating for political transformations directly (such as abolition or social services), he is
granting a basic humanity to these downtrodden individuals that America has cast aside. The
final two lines replicate the dialectic on liberty, presenting the spread of liberty as “cycles of
preparation and accretion,” that continue to churn, and tying such works to the divine and
ethereal, “the threads that connect the stars.” Through the poet, the beauty of each is exposed, or
as Whitman goes on to describe, “Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch
or am touched from” (526). Whitman acknowledges the power of poetry in these lines and envisions himself as the key figure in spreading its transformative grace.

What this brief exploration demonstrates is that, though the centrality of the concept of liberty to American literature has long been acknowledged, the terms through which these poets of the antebellum articulate their views on the subject are themselves part of a much larger continuity, stretching across the revolution and back towards the ideals arising in the works of Milton and other public sphere poets who work to affect the political discourse of the eighteenth century. Rereading these canonical authors of nineteenth century America in light of the tradition I have traced throughout the eighteenth century returns them to their contemporary contexts and more clearly characterizes the symbolic language that they were able to use to advance their specific political message. These authors, while operating in the new confines of the young republic, were entering into the ongoing dialectic on liberty, continuing a poetic tradition through which poets were engaging public imagination and affecting public opinion. They presented new variations on familiar themes, and by casting them in the proven tropes, they gave significance to each similarity and difference, fusing the forms and images of antiquity and contemporary Britain and, from that same material, forging a new uniquely American identity and ensuring the continuation of the dialectic on liberty.
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