

# Amazing Grace

AN ANTHOLOGY OF POEMS  
ABOUT SLAVERY, 1660-1810

edited by

JAMES G. BASKER

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[?JOSEPH DENNIE], (1768-1812)

As author or editor, Joseph Dennie was responsible for all eight of the following poems about Thomas Jefferson and slavery. Scholars have determined that one of them ("Song by the Sage of Monticello") is definitely by Dennie. Others may be, as they all appeared anonymously in his anti-Jeffersonian periodical *The Port Folio* (published in Philadelphia) within a few months in 1802-3. A Harvard-educated lawyer and writer who served briefly in the Adams administration, Dennie was still smarting from Jefferson's election in 1800 and the ascendancy of the Republicans. When allegations of Jefferson's affair with his slave Sally Hemings erupted in 1802, Dennie, like many Federalist propagandists, leapt into action. The result, even if based in fact, was some of the most scurrilous, obscene, and racist political satire in American history.

In the first, the poet affects a slave dialect to mock Jefferson for espousing universal freedom while owning slaves. In his ironic depiction of a slave embracing "Jeffersonian democracy," his loathing for Jefferson is eclipsed by the unrelieved racism of his own assumptions about black people.

[Unriled]\*

Our massa Jefferson he say,

Dat all mans free alike are born;

\*[from the editor's note:] I was yesterday sympathizing with a friend, at the fate of poor captain Jack, alias Quashee, who was unfortunately hung at Winston, North-Carolina, only for an "intention to rise, and commence a general massacre of the white inhabitants." My friend told me, that, among the accomplishments he was universally known to possess, his poetical talents had not been much noticed; that many of his fugitive pieces possessed considerable merit, and he hoped they would be collected and published by the democratic society, of which he (poor fellow!) had been a member; in proof of this, he produced from his pocket the following copy of admirable verses, which I requested, and obtained permission to send you. . . . The orthography I have not dared to alter, as . . . it would have lost much of its inimitable wildness and simplicity.

JOSEPH DENNIE

Den tell me, why should Quashee stay,  
To tend de cow and hoe de corn?  
Huzza for massa Jefferson!

And if all mans alike be free,  
Why should de one, more dan his broder,  
Hab house and corn? for poor Quashee  
No hab de one, no hab de oder.  
Huzza, &c.

And why should one hab de white wife,  
And me hab only Quangeroo?  
Me no see reason for me life!  
No! Quashee hab de white wife too.  
Huzza, &c.

For make all like, let blackee nab  
De white womans . . . dat be de track!  
Den Quashee de white wife will hab,  
And massa Jef. shall hab de black.  
Huzza, &c.

Why should a judge (him alway white)  
'Pon pickaniny put him paw,  
Cause he steal little? dat no rite!  
No! Quashee say he 'll hab no law.  
Huzza, &c.

Who care, me wonder, for de judge?  
Quashee no care. . . . no not a feder;  
Our party soon we make him trudge,  
We all be democrat togeder.  
Huzza, &c.

For where de harm to cut de throat  
Of him no like? or rob a little?  
To take him hat, or shoe, or coat,  
Or wife, or horse, or drink, or vittle?  
Huzza, &c.

Huzza for us den! we de boys  
To rob and steal, and burn and kill;  
Huzza! me say, and make de noise!  
Huzza for Quasheel! Quashee will  
Huzza for massa Jefferson!

(July 10, 1802)<sup>320</sup>

The following is the earliest poem in Dennie's magazine to attack Jefferson over the Sally Hemings scandal. A ribald song originally set to the tune of "Yankee Doodle," the poem shows how raucous and vicious early American political life could be. Although Jefferson highmindedly declined to answer the Hemings allegations and was elected to a second term as president, modern scholarship has determined that his affair with Hemings was real and that she bore children by him. The poet's main accusation, therefore, was devastatingly true.

*From "A Song Supposed to Have Been Written by  
the Sage of Monticello"*

Et etiam *furco grata colore Venus*. OVID.

*And Venus pleases though as black as jet.*

Of all the damsels on the green,

On mountain, or in valley,

A lass so luscious ne'er was seen

As Monticellian Sally.

Yankee doodle, who's the noodle?

What wife were half so handy?

To breed a flock, of slaves for stock,

A blackamoor's the dandy. . . .

When press'd by loads of state affairs,

I seek to sport and dally,

The sweetest solace of my cares

Is in the lap of Sally.

Yankee doodle, &c. . . .

You call her slave—and pray were slaves

Made only for the galley?

Try for yourselves, ye witless knaves—

Take each to bed your Sally.

Yankee doodle, whose the noodle?

Wine's vapid, tope me brandy—

For still I find to breed my kind,

A negro-wench the dandy!

(October 2, 1802)<sup>321</sup>

Written in a colloquial, bantering idiom, this satiric ode offers mock consolation even as it lacerates Jefferson for his alleged indiscretions with Sally Hemings. Its jocular tone can be contrasted with the more elaborate and elevated

style of John Quincy Adams's version of the same Horatian ode, also published in 1802 and included elsewhere in this anthology.

*Another Imitation of Horace, Book II. Ode 4 . . .  
Addressed to a Certain Great Man*

Nay hang not Tom, your nether lip;

Tho' you with Quashee made a slip,

Your fame it will not blight;

Ajax a captive maid admir'd;

Achilles by a slave was fir'd;

Both damsels tho' were *white*.

Who knows but Quasheba may spring

From some illustrious sable King;

And mourns her chang'd degree:

Odsbodikins, if this were true,

And son-in-law t' a monarch, you,

How devilish proud you'd be.

Certes, a wench, though strait and tall,

With lips so large and teeth so small,

Though lively plump and mellow,

Descended of ignoble race,

Would ne'er be suffered to solace

The *sage of Monticello*.

But banish, Tom, all vain alarm,

Altho' I paint each witching charm

That grac'd your sooty bride;

The heyday of my blood is o'er;

For I am verging to three score,

And have a wife beside.

(October 30, 1802)<sup>322</sup>

Framed, like so many of these attacks, in "Jefferson's" voice, the following mock love song is similarly indecent, but much more cruel. Heartlessly invoking Jefferson's loss of his wife, Martha (who had died in 1782), the satirist presents a lonely widower turning for consolation to his attractive black servant Sally Hemings.

*From "A Philosophic Love-Song To Sally"*

In glaring red, and chalky white,

Let others beauty see;

Me no such tawdry tints delight—  
 Nol black's the hue for me!\*

Thou, Sally, thou, my house shalt keep,

My widow'd tears shall dry!

My virgin daughters—see! they weep—

Their mother's place supply.

Oh! Sally! hearken to my vows!

Yield up thy swarthy charms—

My best belov'd my more than spouse,

Oh! take me to thy arms!

(November 6, 1802)<sup>33</sup>

In these mock-heroic lines, "Phyllis" (Sally Hemings) addresses "Demo-phoon" (Jefferson), pleading with him to return to Monticello from Washington. The poem bespeaks sexuality run rampant: Phyllis is surrounded by her mulatto children (fathered by Jefferson), while faithful Cudjoe complains about the overseer neglecting the plantation in order to dally with one of the slaves, "aunt Dinah."

from "Phyllis to Demo-Phoon"<sup>†</sup>

For thee I sigh, and thy long absence mourn,

O haste then to my arms; return, return.

Of do the beauteous pledges of our love

Disconsolate around their mother move,

With whining sob demand their father dear,

Till bread and butter dry the glist'ning tear.

Thy faithful servants frequent ask me when

From the *great town* thou will come back again;

Old Cudjoe cries, to duty's bidding true,

"Do make the paper peak, do missy, do;

Tell massa quick come home; now he no here,

De corn field neber see de overseer;

Him all day sleepin in de fodder-house

\* [Author's note] In Addison's *Cato*, we find a warm advocate for African beauty, Sphyax, when observing Iuba to be enamoured with the Roman maids, thus speaks to his Prince of the beautiful damisels of Numidia: "The glowing dames of Zama's royal court, have faces flush'd with more exalted charms. Were you with these my Prince, you'd soon forget the pale unpen'd beauties of the North."

† [from author's note] The following ludicrous letter, supposed to be addressed to a *philosophic* personage, by a *jaezy* mistress, has made us laugh and sneer at *republican* morality.

While neger working, him no wout a house.

Him often wid aunt Dinah in de barn;

I peep one day; dey no go dere for corn;

I no been bab um, but I bet a guinea,

'Fore Christmas next, she had a pickaninny."

(December 4, 1802)<sup>32a</sup>

This little dirty draws on an instance of slavery shaping history from beneath. The song bids defiance to an army that Napoleon had sent to refortify Louisiana: en route, the French forces stopped in Haiti to quell the slave insurrection, and were decimated by disease. This compounded the difficulty of defending Louisiana, and the French were soon willing to let Jefferson purchase it. As the poem suggests, the question of how to apportion the Louisiana Territory into slave and free states would soon sharpen the ongoing American debate between pro- and antislavery advocates.

*Patriotic Song* \*

At last the French have come my boys!

What then? we do not fear 'em!

We scorn their sansculottish noise;

Besides—we're not yet near 'em.

Chorus. Columbia has no cause for dread,

While freedom smiles upon her,

Bold JEFFERSON her troops shall head,

And lead them on to honour. . . .

On southern states the tempest raves;

And, lo!—not Gallic cattle—

The demos, mustering up their slaves,

March, ardent, to the battle.

Chorus. Columbia, &c.

(March 5, 1803)<sup>32b</sup>

Composed as a medley, this polyphonic ode plays upon every anti-Jeffersonian theme: the lover of freedom who thrives in a slave-based society, the patriot who somehow fails to serve in the military, the virtuous republican who in-

\* [from author's note] A patriotic song, intended to be published, should we be obliged to declare war against the French, for attempting, (as some think they will, soon after their arrival in Louisiana,) to deprive our southern democratic citizens of their property, by exciting their negroes to run away from them.

dulges his lust with slave women. The poet seems little concerned about slavery itself, except as a weapon with which to attack Jefferson.

*from "A Piece of an Ode to Jefferson"*

The God of this new world [Milton, Par. Iosé]

Muse, bid the song commence from that blest morn,  
When to a wondering world a patriot chief was born,

When first his durance ended,

While gossips round grew witty,

The boy, by slaves attended,

Heard Dinah sing this ditty.

Peaceful slumber in de cradle,

Lilly Tommy, Dinah nigh,

Stirring hominy wid de ladle;

Den sing, Tommy, lullaby;

Lullaby, lullaby, lullaby, lullaby;

Den sing, Tommy, lullaby, . . .

Haste from the schools, from science' simple lore,

To where, enlarg'd, on nature's boundless plan,

His ardent mind would freedom's wilds explore,

As Mungo taught the sacred *rights of man*.

Ah! massa Tom, you lity tink

When Mungo work all de day,

Midout one drop of run to drink,

Dat Mungo wish to run away.

Though you born here, and white as snow,

Poor Mungo black, from Guinea shore;

Yet both alike—for Mungo know,

All white mans are all blackamoor. . . .

In the cornfield I stand, with my negroes around,

Their glances from all sides my passion confound;

For Sal, Peg, and Quash, my inconsistency burns;

Though I'll take Sal the first, they shall all have their turns.

War, is but a peck of troubles;

Honour, virtue—empty bubbles;

Ne'er will I, for either sighing,

Slight my Sal—though love is cloying,

If the wench is worth the buying,

Surely she is worth enjoying:

JOSEPH DENNIE

Lovely Sally stands beside me,

She's the girl my purse provides me.

(March 19, 1803)<sup>326</sup>

In response to rumors of Jefferson's displeasure over earlier poetic attacks, the poet here mocks Jefferson's resolute silence, especially on the subject of Sally Hennings.

*Ego et Rex Mens. Myself and the President*

So, Tom, you do not like my ode!

Now, 'pon my word, that's very odd,

For 'tis a mighty good one;

And, when 'tis finish'd, I'll declare,

'Twill fit your honour to a hair;

Or call my muse a rude one.

Tell me where you can find a fault?

Is the verse lame? does the rhyme hurt?

In what is it amiss?

May I no speeches get to print,

If 'tis not good!—the devil's in 't,

If you're not pleas'd with this!

Why then, I'll say where 'tis not right:

You make me "scamper"—for his flight,

The feds your friend will rally;

You speak of "Gossips"—that I blame;

And then about the blacks—for shame!

Say not a word of "*Sally*."

(March 19, 1803)<sup>327</sup>