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WIT AND HUMOR IN THE SLAVE NARRATIVES

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Though the slave narratives were usually intended to serve in the cause of abolition, not all of them, it is interesting to note, are bitter, unrelieved tirades against the terrible institution of slavery, but rather there are frequently moments of relieving laughter. It is paradoxical that the former slaves, recalling the private hell of oppression under which they lived, the bitter beatings, degradation, and humiliation, the brutal murder of loved ones, and the separations from mothers, wives, and children, could find anything to laugh about in their recollections. And yet, laugh they did, grim though their laughter often was. For in slavery they had learned the saving art of laughing to keep from crying, as John Little explains:

They say slaves are happy, because they laugh, and are merry. I myself and three or four others, have received two hundred lashes in the day, and had our feet in fetters; yet at night, we would sing and dance, and make others laugh at the rattling of our chains. Happy men we must have been! We did it to keep down trouble, and to keep our hearts from being completely broken: that is as true as the gospel! Just look at it,—must not we have been very happy? Yet I have done it myself—I have cut capers in chains. (Little, 1969, pp. 39-40)

This passage suggests something of the nature of Black humor and the function it has served, not only in the slave narratives, but in the folk tales and throughout the history of recorded literature from William Wells Brown to Amiri Baraka. The life revealed in all of these sources is shown to often be alternately degrading and courageous, tragic and absurdly comic, hopeless and yet enduring; indeed that life could hardly ever be termed merely amusing. And the Black character, though he may be seen to laugh, can hardly be deemed carefree, unbothered, satisfied, even truly happy. Indeed the paradox of Negro humor is that in the background there is always the grim and harsh reality of Black life in America, but like Little the Black man has been able to laugh as he probes his bleeding wound—to laugh instead of succumb to utter despair and defeat. Thus his humor has been compensatory. His anguish has left him no alternative but to laugh or cry, and as is illustrated in the blues

line, "I've got the blues, but I'm too damn mean to cry," the slave often refused the tears that would indicate surrender, and chose rather to secure some relief and thus some victory in laughter.

Much of the humor in the narratives capitalizes on the ludicrousness of the white man's statutes and the contradictions inherent in the existence of a slave system, with its dehumanizing laws, in a country which took great pride in its promise of democracy, freedom and liberty to all and in its idealistic political documents, specifically the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Among those narrators who satirize the pretense and hypocrisy of their slave masters' espousal of freedom, liberty, and democracy are Milton Clarke, Lunsford Lane, William Craft, and William Wells Brown. Representative of the biting sarcasm in their treatment of this paradoxical situation is the following selection from William Grimes's *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave*:

If it were not for the stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave, I would in my will leave my skin as a legacy to the government, desiring that it might be taken off and made into parchment, and then bind the constitution of glorious happy *and free* America. Let the skin of an American slave, bind the charter of American Liberty!

Another paradoxical situation which the slave narrators treat with a great deal of irony and sarcasm is the hypocrisy of the old slave masters and ministers who espoused Christianity while practicing quite the opposite of what they preached. Obviously the narrators not only relieve their frustrations in the face of these ludicrous situations in these accounts, but they attempt here as elsewhere through the use of comedy to educate and bring about meaningful changes. Among those who satirize the "Christian piety" of white slaveholders are Frederick Douglass, Lunsford Lane, James Mars, John Brown, William Craft, Milton Clarke, Henry Bibb, John Thompson, and Henry Box Brown. It is further interesting to note the irony in the fact that many of the slaves assert that the more ardently the master claimed to embrace Christianity, the more inhuman and unchristian was his treatment of his slaves. Frederick Douglass relates the conversion to Christianity of his master Thomas and comments, "If religion had any effect on his character at all, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways." (Douglass, 1969, p. 197) Later when Douglass was transferred from the cruel Covey, to whom he had been hired out, to a kinder master, Mr. Freeland, he was happy because, "the latter gentleman made no profession of religion. I assert most unhesitatingly," Douglass continues, "that the religion of the South—as I have observed it and proved it—is a mere

covering for the most horrid crimes; the justifier of the most appalling barbarity; a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds; and a secure shelter, under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal abominations fester and flourish. . . of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst.” (Douglass, 1969, pp. 257-258) Douglass’s opinion is endorsed by Lunsford Lane in the following comment inspired by his wife’s sale to a Mr. Smith:

[Mr. Smith was] a member and class-leader in the Methodist church, and in much repute for his deep piety and devotion to religion. But grace (of course) had not wrought in the same *manner* upon the heart of Mr. Smith, as nature had done upon that of Mr. Boylan, who made no religious profession. (Lane, 1845, p. 11)

Lane goes on to detail the cruelty of Smith, who would not even allow his slaves adequate food: “such luxuries,” Lane satirically concludes, “were more than he could afford, kind and Christian man as he was considered to be.” (Lane, 1845, pp. 13-14)

It is not surprising that the objects of most frequent abuse as Christian hypocrites were ministers. A typical comment is made by William Craft after he cites a long list of ministers, their hypocritical defenses of the Fugitive Slave Bill, and their ludicrous attempts to reconcile the bill with Christianity. Sarcastically characterizing them as “learned doctors as well as a host of lesser traitors,” he concludes:

We are told that the whale vomited up the runaway prophet. This would not have seemed so strange, had it been one of the above lukewarm Doctors of Divinity whom he had swallowed; for even a whale might find such a morsel difficult of digestion. (Craft, 1860, p. 99)

In a great many episodes the slave narrators also note the irony in the unethical behavior of their masters who prided themselves on being gentlemen. The masters are satirized for their marital infidelity, vulgarity, rowdiness, greed, prejudice, deception, their exploitation of slaves, and their duplicity in their business relationships and dealings.

Interestingly enough, in their humorous attacks on whites, the slave writers often attack the slave mistress more vituperatively than the slave master. These accounts zealously and vitriolically contradict the plantation school writers’ carefully established myth of the plantation mistress as a gentele, refined, sympathetic gentlewoman of

great sensibility. Lewis Clarke maliciously lampoons the slave mistress, observing:

Of all the animals on the face of this earth, I am most afraid of a real mad, passionate, raving, slaveholding woman. . . . I am sure I would sooner lie down to sleep by the side of tigers than near a raging-mad slave-woman. (Barker, ed., 1846, p. 11)

A similar slave-holding woman treated in much detail is Louis Hughes's tyrannical madam whom he describes as "naturally irritable." (Hughes, 1897, p. 72) Noting how she would often hit him when he passed her something at the table, he vehemently gibes, "such an exhibition of table manners by a would-be fine lady—such vulgar spite and cruelty!" (Hughes, 1897, p. 86) Of this absolute mockery of the slave-holding woman as a gentle angel of mercy, the plantation cook comments, "I tell you Satan neber git his own til he git her." (Hughes, 1897, p. 71)

Constantly attacked for their own ignorance, the slaves of course derived much satisfaction and revenge in observing the ignorance of the so-called superior white man, and they delighted in accounts of his stupidity, his ineptness as a businessman, his fear of conjuration, and his gullibility. Noteworthy examples of such humorous attacks may be found in the narratives of John Brown, Josiah Henson, and Henry Bibb.

A great deal of the humor in the slave narratives deals with accounts of slaves outsmarting and getting revenge on these foolish old masters, deceiving them, stealing from them, humiliating them, beating them, and escaping from them. So dominant is this theme in the chronicles that one collection of slave narratives is appropriately titled "Puttin' on Ole Massa." Henry Bibb has written, "the only weapon of self defense that I could use successfully, was that of deception." (Bibb, 1849, p. 17) Andres Jackson comments, "A lie is often useful to them, and the truth so often disastrous, and their aptness at a lie is such, that they take in sustaining it, an air of assurance and tranquility which imposes upon strangers." (Jackson, 1847, p. 29) Thus the slaves lied to their masters and told them they were happy and contented and did not want freedom; they lied to their masters and told them they were sick and could not work; they lied to their masters and told them they loved them. They lied to their masters and laughed at their credulity.

There are numerous hilarious accounts of the slaves stealing from their masters, acts which obviously gave them some personal sense of pleasure as a form of retaliation and attack upon their owners. The slave narrators relish relating these tales, and even the

most religious of them and the most devoted of them, do not in the least apologize for or repent these acts. As Lewis Clarke commented when asked if slaves have conscientious scruples about stealing from their owners, "If they can keep their backs safe, conscience is quiet enough on this point." (Barker, 1846, p. 92) Further, the slave did not consider stealing food from a master who robbed him of his liberty and the rewards of his labor as really stealing. Frederick Douglass humorously rationalizes his stealing food from his master with a comment so common it has become a folktale:

. . .it was only a question of *removal*—the taking his meat out of one tub, and putting it into another; the ownership of the meat was not affected by the transaction. At first, he owned it in the tub, and last, he owned it in *me*. (Douglass, 1969, p. 189)

Josiah Henson proudly characterized his thievery as valiant acts of chivalry:

No *white* knight, rescuing white fair ones from cruel oppression, ever felt the throbbing of a chivalrous heart more intensely than I, a *black* knight, did, in running down a chicken in an out-of-the-way place to hide till dark, and then carry to some poor overworked black fair one, to whom it was at once food, luxury, and medicine. No Scotch borderer, levying black mail or sweeping off a drove of cattle, ever felt more assured of the justice of his act than I of mine in driving a mile or two into the woods a pig or a sheep and slaughtering it for the good of those whom Riley was starving. I felt good, moral heroic. (Henson, 1970, pp. 21-23)

Some of the most hilarious accounts in the narratives deal with beating old master. Obviously these tales of aggressive behavior served to relieve many of the frustrations of the slaves' daily lives, which were filled with humiliations, and served to enhance their sense of dignity and pride. A typical example of this is one of the few highly comic scenes in Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in which he gives a lengthy account of a fight which he had with the white slave driver Covey, to whom his master had hired him out. After a beaten, bleeding Douglass vainly reports Covey's cruel treatment to his master, Covey again attacks the slave, who this time fights back energetically, though at first he carries on a purely defensive battle, not delivering blows. Douglass relates:

I flung him on the ground several times, when he meant to have hurled me there. I held him so firmly by the throat, that his blood followed my nails. He held me, and I held him.

All was fair, thus far, and the contest was about equal. My resistance was entirely unexpected, and Covey was taken all aback by it, for he trembled in every limb. "*Are you going to resist, you scoundrel?*" said he. To which, I returned a polite "*yes sir*"; . . . (Douglass, 1969, p. 243)

When Covey attempts to get to a stick, Douglass pulls him down on the "*not over clean ground*—for we were now in the cow yard." He continues, "He had selected the place for the fight, and it was but right that he should have all the advantages of his own selection." (Douglass, 1969, p. 244) There is some additional humor in Covey's imploring the other Blacks to help him and their pretending ignorance of what he means. After two hours, Douglass writes:

Letting me go, he said, —puffing and blowing at a great rate—"now, you scoundrel, go to your work; I would not have whipped you half so much as I have had you not resisted." The fact was, *he had not whipped me at all.* (Douglass, 1969, p. 246)

Douglass goes on to note that Covey never touched him again, humorously adding, "He would, occasionally, say he did not want to have to get hold of me again—a declaration which I had no difficulty in believing. . ." (Douglass, 1969, p. 246)

Oddly enough, some of the most mirthful passages in these chronicles deal with the slaves' hypocritical reactions to the illnesses and deaths of their masters. These grimly humorous passages most frequently derive their humor from the discrepancy between the slaves' pretended grief and their actual joy. Some of the most amusing of these episodes are found in the accounts of James L. Smith, Lewis Clarke, William Grimes, William Wells Brown, and John Brown. William Wells Brown uses a humorous reversal in his comment on his master's illness, having received the news while in jail for attempting to escape. He writes:

I had been in jail but a short time when I heard that my master was sick, and nothing brought more joy to my heart than that intelligence. I prayed fervently

for him—not for his recovery, but for his death.
(Brown, 1847, p. 74)

John Brown contemptuously relates his master's illness and death:

Not for very long after this, Stevens was struck with paralysis. He lost the use of one side, and of his speech. I was called in to watch and tend him, but I did not think it my duty to understand all he tried to say. This made him very savage. . . . When the "people" learnt he was not likely to recover, they were much pleased, and used to be very merry at quarters, for they knew they could not have a worse master. At last he died, and very glad we all were. I know I was; and even now, at this distance of time, when my troubles are all over, I cannot help feeling that the world was well rid of him. I only hope he did not go where there is any chance of my meeting with him again. He was buried, any how, nobody regretting him; not even his old dog, who wagged his tail when the coffin went by his kennel. (Brown, John, 1971, pp. 51-52)

One of the most highly prized victories of the slaves, of course, was their escapes from their masters, and many of the narratives contain humorous accounts of their flights to freedom. Much of the humor in these tales derives from outsmarting the slave master in order to make their break for freedom. Frequently also the narrators recount other narrow escapes during their flight in a comic tone. One of the most hilarious of these accounts is William Craft's description of his escape while posing as the slave of his near-white wife, Ellen, who was disguised as a white gentleman. Ellen's masquerade as a Mr. Johnson provokes much humor as unsuspecting white racists discuss niggers with "him," cater to and kindly inquire about "his" health, and as white damsels flirt with "him." One kind white gentleman, upon learning that "Mr. Johnson" was suffering from "inflammatory rheumatism," commiserates, "Oh! that is very bad, sir. . . . I can sympathise with you; for I know from bitter experience what the rheumatism is," to which William ironically observes, "If he did, he knew a good deal more than Mr. Johnson." (Craft, 1860, p. 59) When the unsuspecting white ladies obviously were smitten by Ellen, Craft humorously comments, "To use an American expression, 'they fell in love with the wrong chap.'" (Craft, 1860, p. 60)

There is much humor arising from the double entendres here

too. When one gentlemen suggested that "Mr. Johnson" not go North for the restoration of his health, but rather to the Warm Springs in Arkansas, "Mr. Johnson" replied that "he thought the air of Philadelphia would suit his complaint best; and, not only so, he thought he could get better advice there." (Craft, 1860, p. 51)

Lewis Clarke's report of his flight from slavery is a suspenseful drama which elicits the reader's concern for his safety at the same time that it provokes laughter at the numerous hilarious accounts of his narrow escapes. During his flight, while posing as a Causcasian, he met and nursed a sick white man who was traveling on the ship with him. Clarke notes:

One day, in conversation with him, he spoke of the slaves in the most harsh and bitter language, and was especially severe on those who *attempted to run away*. Thinks I, you are not the man for me to have much to do with. (Barker, 1846, p. 32)

Other humorous accounts of close scrapes include the scene in which, in order to avoid recognition, he acquires some dark glasses that almost completely blind him; and the scene at the hotel where he pretends to be deaf because he has forgotten his assumed name.

It is necessary to note before concluding that the white man is not, of course, the only target of the satire and jokes in the slave chronicles. Most of the narrators occasionally reveal the typical and persistent ability of many Blacks throughout their history in this country to laugh at their own superstitions, foibles, fears, cowardice, indoctrination, and ignorance.

Unquestionably, a consideration of the slave narratives indicates that the Black American slave's sense of humor was often his salvation, or as James Weldon Johnson has his narrator in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* to assert, "It [his humor] had done much to keep him [the American Negro] from going the way of the Indian." (Johnson, 1960, p. 56) Faced with the ambiguous situation of having to live as a slave within a "democratic," "Christian" country, the Black American slave was able to ridicule the ludicrousness of that situation and thus secure some relief from his frustrations. Forced into the degrading and dehumanizing role of mere merchandise, of lowly chattel, he had the courage to create and/or capitalize on humorous situations that allowed him to experience some sense of dignity and pride. Forced to suffer at the hands of a formidable and often brutal foe, he was able to attack him in his humor and thus secure some measure of revenge and victory. Faced with his own ignorance in certain situations, he often showed the ability to laugh and rise above it rather than despair and accept defeat.

AND these men who are the subject of this paper not only survived and endured; they *overcame*, and, it is significant to add, they had one hell of a good time laughing about that.

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