

Slavery, M. Dumesnil

O love of Mankind! Gentle progeny
Of the Eternal, you whose charity
Soothes grief... Cry triumph! Let this song I sing
Ring clear! Come, fill the hearts of man and king.
But, that more touched they be, and better painted
Your pomp and glory, let me trace the tainted
Ways in which Man, spurning the rights of others,
Long treated as vile beasts his human brothers.

Laws themselves scorned his origin divine.
Did he, proud masterpiece of heaven's design,
With brow raised toward celestial heights, born free—
Noble brow blazoned with God's majesty—
Receive his strength, his holy spirit, thus,
Only to let you, ignominious
Races of old, debase them? And, yet worse,
O you, bold masters of the universe,
What did you do for him? Alas! You cast
His flesh in chains, you bound his irons fast...
Citizens trample slaves beneath their feet,
Groaning their pain, to servitude complete
Condemned... Freedom? No more a boon for all!

Rather, it lies usurped in tyrants' thrall.

In Egypt's, Athens', Rome's bazaars, one can

Buy and sell, for a price, gods' image—Man!

Troubling the peace of honest innocence,

How many the ills this commerce cruel foments!

A patriarch sees his sons willingly

Betray their brother into slavery:

How many the tears this tenderest father sheds

When, to his gaze, a bloodied tunic spreads

The horror of the crime they would keep hidden!

Thus does this vicious scourge reveal, guilt-ridden,

Jealousy's vile excess, with venom rife,

That poisons thus the worthy elder's life.

. . .

[Dumesnil traces slavery through ancient times. Christ announces the end of slavery. But sullyng Christianity, practices of slavery resume]

But crimes against religion and against

Nature despoiled, with murderous hand, commenced

To sully Christian glory in a tide

Of blood shed in foul traffic's fratricide.ⁱ

At length, Columbus's new world it was

That much enriched mankind, yet was the cause

Whereby Greed's and Fanaticism's daughter—

Ferocity—spreads wide across the water
Her fulsome horror; monsters twain, they join
Combat's destructive demon to purloin
Glittering Inca gold drenched deep in gore,
Whetting their lust for blood and gold yet more,
Ever more gorging, never glutted, never
Sated, until, at last, their dark endeavor,
Mid rapine's embers, has stripped bare the land
Unpeopled; whence they cast their thieving hand—
In frenzied flight—across the sea to sow
Africa's peace with carnage, pain, and woe.ⁱⁱ

Children of nature—pure and innocent—
Lived in her image on that continent,
Free of desire, of envy, only paying
Heed to their senses and their needs obeying,
Intent on living well their lives—too short!—
Far from ambition and its foul cohort
Of vices; happy, they, to dwell within
The simple tent or hut, untouched by sin,
Sheltered from wealth of cities' luxury,
Unknown, they lived in sweet equality,
Carefree and tranquil... Such, the happy state
Of Cédar, who, sharing his master's fate

Was his companion, not his slave, and who
Knew not what humble birth condemned one to.
They trampled underfoot, like common clay,
That gold that, in our climes, holds haughty sway,
Before which, like idolaters, we stand
Offering honor, glory, fatherland—
Nature itself!—to its proud tyranny.
Nor had sedition, party rivalry,
Made some the victors, some the victims; now
Killers, now killed... Nor did they yet allow
Their souls in burning flames to be devoured;
Souls wherein goodness, pity, wisdom flowered,
Reigning supreme, powerful but benign:
Virtues whereby Man equals the divine.

Thus did these tribes fraternal gently share
Their peaceful life, when lo! now landing there,
Come Europe's monsters! Soon vile Greed would seek
To stain them too, seduce their chieftains, weak
Of head and heart; corrupt their laws; foment
Wars at their pleasure, everywhere they went.ⁱⁱⁱ
Where do they go, these brigands fury-led?
They slip betwixt the shadows; light their tread

And silent, as the village sleeps—and slay
The old, the feeble wailing their dismay;
Seize husbands, wives, at rest, caught by surprise;
And stuffing shut their mouths, stifle their sighs,
Their frantic cries; push them on, lashed and whipped—
This human chattel from their tent-homes ripped
Unwilling... Over rocks, in desert sun,
Bent by their loads and shackle-bruised, each one
Is shoreward dragged, where, howling loud his pleasure,
The European grips his prey, his treasure,
In avaricious claws... How many were
The wretches that the executioner
Grasped not? How many, in that march of death,
Beneath their weight of woe, gasped their last breath
And thus escaped his clutches? Let us shed
Well-deserved tears; and, among all those dead,
Let us here rescue from oblivion
A certain maid; a young and lovely one
Whose baleful destiny would leave its mark
On the heart of the doughty Mungo-Park.

Aglow with youth and comely grace, the fair
Néala watched with tenderest of care
Over her father, frail and heavy laden

Beneath his years, as she, most loving maiden,
Guided his trembling steps; now by the shore
Of the belovèd stream they both adore;
Now by the fields that, brightly colored, loom
Fair in their sight; often, too, by the tomb—
Flower-spread, strewn with tears—where, dead, the other
Néala lies, who was the beauty's mother.^{iv}
Her father is her all; never does she
Abandon him, this new Antigone
Of joyful mien... Protect her with your might,
O God; she who, with gentle hands, each night,
Would spin to thread the tufts of down that grow,
Silken and soft, in our fields here below;
Thread that a brother's skill would weave and braid
Into a fabric which, to a fair shade
Of blue, the maid would dye, happy to give
The old man garments. Thus did the pair live
In the contentment of their native hut,
All their needs simply, amply met... Oh, but
Everything changes!... One night, in a flood,
Suddenly spewed, of innocent black blood,
She sees her father, in her arms, attacked.
Néala, horror-rent, quick to react,

Places her body like a living shield
Before him! Ah, what virtue she revealed
In her duress! Awestruck but unaffected
By such devotion, one sees him protected
By her great courage... Passing irritated
That time is fleeting and that they have waited
Even a moment, the fierce enemy--
Burning hot to pursue their villainy,
Their crime--proceed to slay their victim, who
Quivers his last as she clings fast unto
His bloodied body, whence they separate
The pair by force, stifling the shouts of hate
That the fair heroine shrieks out in pain;
Bear her off, hanging from one common chain
Whereon moans many a sufferer now, who could
Rival Néala in her victimhood.
Down she falls to her knees, pleading with those
Who have abducted her: "O woe of woes,"
She cries. "Pray let me bide in this sad place
That witnesses my grief. Let me but grace
My father's last remains. Let me entomb
His bones; that father whom you slew, and whom
Nature would honor. Then back shall I come,

Throw myself at your feet in martyrdom
Straightway.” They answered not, but let the lash
Cut, unremitting, many a vicious gash
Into her flesh’s pain-wracked loveliness.
Despite the whip, she will not acquiesce
To its blows, pushing, prodding her apace:
“Useless your rage! I will not quit this place
Nor follow you,” said she. “Here will I die!
At least by my own death shall I deny
Whatever boon my father’s murder wrought.”
May heaven avenge sweet innocence distraught!
Strike down those vile assassins to the last!
Three times the sun its veil of night had cast
Upon its light since, through the dust, they would—
Fell villains—drag this model of the good,
The virtuous, in their foul wake... At length,
A cry rings out and, doubtless spent her strength,
Néala is no more... O Europe! Look!
See what a toll your savage traffic took!

As desert groans and blood goes gushing, oh!
Shudder before your scenes of ocean’s woe:
Watch as, upon the shores, your agents vile

Into the floating dungeons blithely pile
Hundreds of scores of writhing victims. Gaze
Deep, if you dare, into the dying maze
Of shackled bodies marked for death; stripped bare,
Tighter than coffin-dead, gasping for air...
A putrid air, besmirched with every ill;
And there, abandoned, wallowing until
They meet the fate that some foul god infernal
Metes to those damned to punishment eternal.
This is the fallen angel's dark domain,
Abode where avarice and blood-lust reign
Supreme; where, with his iron scepter, he
Cudgels the wretches in stark misery.
Hideous monsters that hell's precincts spawn
Fight for the right to gnaw and feast upon
The scarcely living flesh... Devouring thirst,
Torturous hunger, and, by far the worst:
Contagion, universal scourge, whose breath
Poisons the fetid air... Everywhere death
Spreads like a dirge. Often despair is such
That it grants to the timid arm as much
Strength as it needs to end one's sorry fate;
Even, at times, to rise and immolate

The murderers, and, hero-wise, cast these
Heinous assassins deep beneath the seas.
Ixion on his wheel, and Tantalus
Over the waves, knew not the odious
Pain of this pit, alas! Eyes quake to see
The bloodshed wrought by death and slavery!

Of slavery and death I find still more
When I cross the Atlantic! Gods! Its shore
Teems with the greed and terror that pursue
Those who escape the Ocean's rage, and who
Are fed by sordid hands that measure, weigh
The scraps that nature in the swill would lay,
Unfit... Their bed? Floor of hard clay! A bed
Dug in a dank cell; bed unvisited
By sleep's repose... And planters who will feed,
Minister-like, that horror's every need!^v
In the air, everywhere, bristling all round,
The whistling of the whip's sinister sound,
Lashing, ripping to shreds the skin of poor
African slaves, who cannot long endure
The rigors of their labors; tears will not—
Nor all their cries—allay their grievous lot
A tittle or a jot, not for a trice:

Pity shares not the field where triumphs vice!

Worthy of fairer fate, a poor wretch—young

Son of a chieftain and, himself, among

The ranks of those destined to power—Zamor,

Warrior battle-bred, would fall before

The chattel-slaver and into his chains,

Ocean-borne, far from home... There he remains

On the shore of America, laid low.

Brave hero, he—tilling with heavy hoe

The alien soil; and, in his mind, still fresh,

His willing blade... Enraged to feel his flesh

Harassed, tortured, tormented, “Heavens above!”

He cries. “These? Christians? Theirs, a God of love,

Of kindness? Why, more cruel than tigers, they!

How unlike Him, I vow, in every way,

Whom they vaunt and would fain commend to us!

Goodness He deals; they, daunting death! And thus,

Ferocious beasts, they quell all my desire

To know His love. Little would I aspire

To hold it in my heart! Alas, since I

Would have to join that paradise on high—

His lordly realm—with those abhorred, best we

Renounce that promised happiness, and flee
Our foes' dominion! Let us, rather, keep
Faith with our fathers' gods. Let firm and deep
Be our belief... What difference is there, pray,
Betwixt us and these Christians! They betray
The hospitable greetings I bestow
On them and theirs: a score of times I show
Compassion as they tread our burning sands,
Buffeted by the storms that in our lands
Blow cruel upon the stranger. Harsh and stark
The winds that wrought distress on Mungo-Park,
Who, hopeless, thought his final hour had come
To end the rigors of his martyrdom,
When lo! he sees my tent; my hands reach out
To bid him welcome... He arrives... No doubt
His time is short!... But soon my sisters' care,
Proffered unstinting—with their chants, their prayer—
Like balm divine, restores his life, protected
And safe from harm! Yet I languish, subjected
To the most frightful, baleful pain! Zamor
Was not born but to fall humbly before
This bane! Too long the anguish of the load
I bear! Time now to quit this rank abode

And go console my sisters and my love
In fair Cabinda, by the shore thereof.^{vi}
And should we die in the attempt, let us
Perish in combat bold and glorious!”
That said, he arms himself. Brothers assemble,
Take heed, march to his voice... The slavers tremble,
Shrink before their assault... Ah me! Ah me!
What vengeance in the wake of tyranny!^{vii}
Need I name all their towns pillaged and sacked?...
The planters’ daughters brutally attacked
In blood-soaked shame?... Yesterday’s slave now made
The executioner, plunging his blade
Into the master’s gaping flanks?... Another,
Slashing the infant that a gasping mother
Holds to her breast?... Husbands, wives--dying, dead—
Clasped in each other’s arms?... Need all be said?
Plucking the fruits of its bloodthirstiness,
Alas, oppression dies midst its excess.
Rebellion rises up and, shaking free
Its enchained limbs, brashly and viciously
Crushes the tyrants with the heaped remains—
Now wrenched asunder—of its former chains.
New Spartacuses, risen proud, await

Until another Crassus seals their fate.

But what divinity is this I see

Descending here? She is Philanthropy.

Daughter of the Almighty, she it is

Whose face bespeaks that majesty of his;

Whose kindness reigns in all her august features,

Burning with saintly love of human creatures,

Compassionate, beloved of humankind,

A loving maiden, she; and, close behind,

Charity follows; and, marching beside,

Faith is her good and ever-mindful guide,

Marking her every forward step; Faith, who

Charms hearts into her holy retinue

With heavenly arts and grace divinely blessed

In gentlest tones: Religion sweet-expressed.

Wise men, at length, take up its rights' defense

Before kings' councils with great eloquence.

In vain do passions and sheer greed join force

In favor of the deadly traffic's course;

Religion speaks. Kings listen: "Is it not

Enough that Europe has thrown in her lot—

Willingly, for a full three hundred years,

By greed inspired—to ravage the Zaire's

Poor children misbegot and desecrated?
Nature watched, trembling; blood flowed unabated;
Heaven moaned low, as God, in His disgust,
Bewailed... Had He not, from one selfsame dust,
Created all Mankind, warmed by one sun?
And had He not, to save us all—each one,
Heathen and pagan too!—from death's thrall, sent
His one begotten Son, with one intent:
To die upon the cross? Like any others,
Africans are His children and your brothers!
O Christians! Stem the tide of their duress!
Cease to bathe in their blood, transgressionless
And innocent, or live in fear before
God the Almighty's wrath forevermore!
Yes, it is time... Let Greed and Vice lie smashed
Upon their altars; let Turk—unabashed
Follower of the sect that foolishly
Accepts a lying prophet's slavery
Of human flesh—wallow in the chaotic,
Mad brigandage of scorned regime despotic.
Bring to the Africans the arts; bestow
Upon them all their boons and beauties; sow
Peace's voice in their midst; let them hold dear

The Christ and hear His word; let them draw near
His temple. May its portals be flung wide,
And may His saints, grace-blessed, ever abide
By His example: holy their endeavor:
Martyrs, if need be; persecutors, never.
Europe, by Africans too long abhorred,
Will see her glory cherished and adored.
Slavery saps the body and the mind,
Humbling the unstrung soul of humankind;
Ravaging labor of its well-earned treasure,
It dulls enjoyment of the sweetest pleasure;
For man by doleful yoke enslaved, naught is
His own: even his children are not his.
And stripped of everything--of hope as well--
He sees his life a painful living hell;
Railing at heaven, cursing his vile state,
He calls on death to free him from his fate...
Kings! With your royal voices set him free!
Soon all those arms unshackled will you see
Doubling their load, honor-inspired; and you
Will fill with twice the wealth your coffers too.
Liberty—mother wise—fosters Man's hand
To industry; gives him a fatherland

Close to the soil; leads him amongst his neighbors
In virtue's path; pays rich his earthly labors;
Raises once more his heart's low spirits when
They falter, falling time and time again;
Stirs arts' consoling wonders vast as she
Sweeps clean the vestiges of savagery...
Thanks to her, let the African forget
His pain in all his blood-stained lands, still wet
With tears long shed; and, at last, may he know,
By the work of his own hands' efforts, lo!
Henceforth, the boon of labors salutary,
And taste life's joy under laws tutelary!"
Religion spoke; and, as our kings complied,
Sitting upon their thrones, reigns by their side.

ⁱ Dumesnil's note] "Christian religion and nature rise up against the state of slavery" (Letter from Léon X to the Dominicans). "It is forbidden to enslave Indians or any other nation, even under the pretext of procuring for them the benefits of Christianity, *because slavery is in itself a crime*" (Bull promulgated in 1537 by Pope Paul III).

ⁱⁱ "flight" captures one of the meanings of the French verb "voler," which connotes both "to fly" and "to steal"

ⁱⁱⁱ [Dumesnil's note] Ever since the start of the slave trade, European slave traders resolved to corrupt the morals and primitive laws of Africans, to foment continuous war between different chiefs. These wars benefit the European instigators, who receive the prisoners of both warring parties on board their ships as slaves. (See Mungo Park's voyages and Clarkson's [The Cries of Africa](#)).

^{iv} In a series of footnotes that are not translated here, Dumesnil refers to other episodes in Park's and Clarkson's works.

^v [Dumesnil's note] In America, a narrow, unhealthy cabin generally serves as housing for the unfortunate blacks. Their bed is a straw mat more useful for bringing discomfort than rest. I'm pleased to be able to say that today they are treated with more humanity, especially in the French colonies, where a wise government has resolved to eliminate all pretexts for revolt.

^{vi} Dumesnil identifies Cabinde as "a port and charming place on the coast of Africa." In a footnote, he elaborates on Zamor's actions as follows: "Blacks from the coast of Mina terminate their lives proudly, persuaded that, amidst those they love, they will return to their country, which they believe to be the most beautiful in the world. But some, instead of coldly committing suicide, seek, as Zamor does, to die by avenging themselves.

^{vii} [Dumesnil's note] The terrible reprisals that blacks in the colonies have taken against whites at different times are well known. The history of modern times is full of these atrocities born in turn by oppression and revolt. Both are equally criminal, condemned by the word of Christ. All decent men see these acts with the same fright and sorrow.