race und *gender*

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Figuring Classical Heroism: African American Uses of the Classical Tradition[1]

The front-page illustration for the July 1837 issue of the Anti-Slavery Record featured a woodcut of a runaway slave. In an essay discussing the runaway slave, the abolitionist editor, Elizur Wright, rewrote the typical American reading of Xenophon's famous account of the march of the 10,000 Greeks retreating from Asia:

> To escape from a powerful enemy, often requires as much courage and generalship as to conquer. One of the most celebrated military exploits on record is the retreat of the ten thousand Greeks under Xenophon, for a great distance through an enemy's country. The sympathy of the reader is wonderfully drawn out for these disappointed Greeks, returning chop-fallen and woefully beset from their unsuccessful attempt to put one Asiatic despot on the throne of another. But the retreat of the ten thousand native Americans now living in Upper Canada, escaping from worse than Asiatic tyranny, and having to pass hungry, and hunted, through the wide domains of false freedom, is far more worthy of being placed upon record. We trust, too, that in a land of Christians these peaceful fugitives will not receive less sympathy that those murderous old Greeks, in their brazen helmets and bull-hide shields […][2]

Xenophon was a wealthy Athenian and friend of Socrates. He left Athens in 401 and joined a multi-national expedition, including ten thousand Greeks, led by the Persian governor Cyrus in an insurrection against the Persian king. After the defeat of Cyrus, it fell to Xenophon to lead the Greeks from the gates of Babylon back across desolate deserts and snow-filled mountain passes, towards the Black Sea and the comparative security of its Greek shoreline cities. Later he wrote the famous vivid account of this ›March Up-Country‹ (*Anabasis*). As Edith Hall has pointed out, in the United States, »the standard identification adopted Xenophon's Greeks as typological ancestors of the self-sufficient white American frontiersman, a version most famously exemplified in Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Essay on History*, where he notes with

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1 This contribution rearranges material recently published in Malamud 2016. It is included in this volume because it adds a significant and surprising example to the topic of classical heroism in the modern age and because the selection made by the author provides quick access to her major points.

2 Elizur Wright, *Anti-Slavery Record* 3, no. 7 (July 1837): 1–2.

approval that Xenophon's men were quick to chop logs and cook, like good Americans, as well as fight.«[3] In his essay, Emerson asked rhetorically:

> What is the foundation of that interest all men feel in Greek history […]? The manners of that period are plain and fierce […] A sparse population and want make every man his own valet, cook, butcher, and soldier, and the habit of supplying his own needs educates the body to wonderful performances […] not far different is the picture Xenophon gives of himself and his compatriots in the Retreat of the Ten Thousand. »After the army had crossed the river Teleboas in Armenia, there fell much snow, and the troops lay miserably on the ground covered with it. But Xenophon arose naked, and, taking an axe, began to split wood; whereupon others rose and did the like«.[4]

Emerson concluded that we can all sympathize with Xenophon's soldiers because they are »a gang of great boys.« »Yet for Elizur Wright« Hall notes, »the North American white man is actually the equivalent of the Asiatic tyrants from whom Xenophon was fleeing, while his Greeks are the forerunners of the heroic new runaways of North America, for example the Native Americans who have had to escape to Canada«.[5] As Marcus Wood has astutely observed, for Wright, the »murderous old Greeks, in their brazen helmets and bull-hide shields« were also the forerunners of the runaway African American slaves escaping subjugation, cruelty and coercion in the United States.[6]

In Wright's polemical appropriation of Xenophon's history and its usual reception in antebellum America, the white slaveholder is more tyrannical than Asian despots, and runaway slaves more heroic than the ancient Greek soldiers. Wright's reading of the Anabasis reflects an entirely different reception of a classical text from Emerson's, one based on his own commitment to abolitionism and his own rhetorical goals. In what follows, I will explore similar examples of polemical use of classical texts by African American activists and their supporters.

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3 Hall 2011, 25. See also the discussion of Elizur Wright, Xenophon and Emerson in Rood 2010, 56–59. Emerson discussed the *Anabasis* in an 1837 public lecture *Manners*, and these remarks were later incorporated in his essay *History* published in 1841.

4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, »History.« Accessed April 4, 2018. http://www.emersoncentral.com/history.htm.

5 Hall 2011, 26.

6 »Those very qualities of initiative and self-dependence which Emerson claims jointly for the Greek hero and American frontiersman are, for Wright, to be relocated and reacquired for the runaway slave.« (Wood 2000, 95).

The depth and extent of the African American engagement with the classical world will surprise many readers. After all, it cannot be denied that American classicism supported white hegemony. To the extent that classical antiquity was appropriated as the political and cultural origin or »past« of the United States, it was interpreted as racially white, which powerfully supported the new republic's domination by white men. Knowledge of classical antiquity was a badge of privilege, and ruling elites adopted names of figures from the classical past as pseudonyms in both their private and public writing and emulated their actions and roles.[7] These elites were even dressed as ancient Romans: late eighteenth and early nineteenth century sculptors typically clad the Founding Fathers in classical dress to show their embrace of Roman Republican values. The overwhelming whiteness of this aspect of the »culture of classicism« made it unthinkable that African Americans could be incorporated into the ruling class of the American republic or as full citizens in a body politic that was inherently racially white.

Thus, the paradox of appropriating the hegemonic discourse of American classicism in the struggle for abolition and equality was that it could yoke African American intellectuals to a culture that suppressed the fullness of their history and identity. Aware of this danger, African Americans forged distinct relationships and dialogues with Classics, which often subverted or contested white hegemonic Eurocentric interpretations and readings of antiquity. As we will see, African Americans and their supporters boldly staked their own claims to the classical world, using texts and images of ancient Greece and Rome to master or challenge their own American experience.

How did free African Americans gain their knowledge of the ancient world? What access did they have to ancient history and classics without knowledge of Greek or Latin? Crucially, translations of Roman and Greek authors were widely available. The Harper publishing firm was organized in 1817 in New York City and its first book was an English translation of Seneca's *Morals*. By the end of the 1820s, the firm was the largest book-printing establishment in the United States and it issued a series of inexpensive book collections called »libraries,« including the Classical Library. From its opening until the beginning of the Civil War, the Classical Library published over 75 titles and featured translations of the works of Homer, Herodotus, Xenophon, Thucydides, the Greek tragedians, Plato, Demosthenes, Cicero, Sallust, Caesar, Horace, Virgil, Livy, Ovid, Juvenal, and more, at an affordable

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7 See Malamud 2009, 9–33; Winterer 2002, 10–43; Richard 1994. For white women and American classicism, see Winterer 2007, 12–141.

price. Additionally, Harper's published William Smith's essential resource, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, first published in 1842. The Classical Library also offered »curricula« for self-study in households, libraries and churches.[8] It is instructive that in 1831 the newspaper *The Workingman's Advocate* assumed there would be a working-class readership of the Classical Library. The paper commented with approval that The Classical Library will furnish, in a cheap form, approved translations of the most esteemed authors of Greece and Rome, and thus afford general access to sources of knowledge which have heretofore been attainable only by a few. It will be one means of breaking down the monopoly of knowledge, which has so long enabled the few to rule and oppress the many.[9]

It is likely that many of these volumes were available in northern urban African American communities where enterprising African Americans established their own schools and their own literary, historical and debating societies and libraries from the 1820s on. Moreover, in addition to ancient authors, especially the ever-popular and widely read Plutarch, long available in English translation, American schoolbooks and modern histories discussed Greek and Roman history. Thus, lack of knowledge of the classical languages did not necessarily mean lack of knowledge of Greco-Roman antiquity. Even illiteracy was not necessarily a barrier to acquiring knowledge. Black abolitionist David Walker (1796–1830), for example, had expected that his literate African American audience would read his *Appeal* aloud to those who could not read and help them understand its content; reading aloud and recitation were common practices in early African American literary societies.[10]

References to the ancient Roman Republic were embedded in the origin narrative of the American Republic: The revolutionaries regularly invoked the example of Cato the Younger and his fierce resistance to the death to the tyranny of Julius Caesar, whom they compared to King George III in their own passionate resistance to the »slavery« of the British monarchy. For instance, in September 1777, the British army captured Philadelphia, defeating George Washington's Continental Army. Through the long and difficult winter that followed, the demoralized troops camped out at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Seeking to rally his troops for the new season of campaigns, General George Washington requested a performance of Joseph Addison's

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8 Cremin 1980, 303.
9 »Classical Library« *Workingman's Advocate*, November 5, 1831.
10 McHenry 2002, 34–35; 53–54.

1713 play, *Cato*, confident in the tonic effect that Cato the Younger's clarion call to fight to the death for liberty would have on the army as it prepared to regroup and engage the British. Washington was not relying on novelty to invigorate his troops, nor was he an isolated commander out of touch with the tastes of his men. He was well aware that his fellow Americans defined themselves in relation not only to the British of the day, but also to the Romans of the past.[11] At the time of the American Revolution, Caesar was popularly represented as a tyrant whose ruthless ambition brought down the Roman Republic. The colonists invoked Caesar's political opponents Brutus, Cassius, Cato and Cicero as heroes in their own struggle against the British monarchy, disparagingly referring to English government officials as »Caesars.«[12] Just as the Romans had resisted the tyranny of Caesar, preferring death to political slavery, so the revolutionaries of America preferred death to slavery under King George III. The metaphor of slavery that the revolutionaries employed to describe their political or economic oppression legitimated and inspired resistance to the British monarchy.

Abolitionists swiftly responded to what they perceived to be the flawed use of Roman references in the rhetoric of the revolution and they too appropriated Roman allusions to validate their own position on the evils of chattel slavery. In a Fourth of July oration delivered in Baltimore to the Maryland Society for the Promotion of the Abolition of Slavery, less than four years after the ratification of the Constitution, physician George Buchanan pointed to the paradox of the American Revolution and the continued existence of the institution of slavery:

> What! Shall a people, who flew to arms with the valor of Roman citizens, when encroachments were made upon their liberties, by the invasion of foreign powers, now basely descend to cherish the seed and propagate the growth of the evil, which they boldly sought to eradicate?[13]

Buchanan and other abolitionists resisted the slavery as metaphor trope, pointing instead to the hypocrisy of the co-existence of the rhetoric of »liberty or death« and the enslavement of fellow human beings. Speaking directly to the founders in his oration, Buchanan admonished them to abolish slavery: »If your forefathers have been degenerate enough to introduce slavery into

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11 On the play and for more discussion of the Revolutionary generation's relationship with ancient Rome see Malamud 2009, 9–18.

12 For examples, see Richard 1994, 91.

13 Buchanan 1970, 12.

your country, to contaminate the minds of her citizens, you ought to have the virtue of extirpating it.«[14] »Such are the effects of subjecting man to slavery,« Buchanan asserted, »that it destroys every human principle, vitiates the mind, instills ideas of unlawful cruelties, and subverts the springs of government.«[15] Buchanan dedicated his oration to Thomas Jefferson and sent him a copy.

Some years later, in 1839, African American slaves aboard a ship called the Amistad revolted to secure their freedom while being transported from one Cuban port to another. The slaves had been kidnapped from the Colony of Sierra Leone and sold to Spanish slavers. Their leader was Sengbe Pieh, a young Mende man, popularly known in the United States as Joseph Cinqué. The captured Mende people demanded that the slavers return them to Sierra Leone. When a gale drove the ship northeast along the United States coastline and the Amistad was seized off Long Island, a reporter from the New York Sun witnessed Cinqué's defiance of his captors and his repeated attempts to escape. He dove from the ship and swam for forty minutes with the ship in pursuit. When he was finally hauled on board and manacled, he addressed his fellow mutineers. A Spanish cabin boy with some knowledge of African dialect translated his speech, which was recorded by the reporter from the *New York Sun*.

> Friends and Brothers – We would have returned [to Africa] but the sun was against us. I could not see you serve the white man, so I induced you to help me kill the Captain. I thought I should be killed – I expected it. It would have been better. You had better be killed than live many moons in misery. I shall be hanged, I think every day. But this does not pain me. I could die happy if by dying I could save so many of my brothers from the bondage of the white man.[16]

Northern abolitionists formed a committee to defend the African captives and John Quincy Adams (1767–1848) pleaded the cause of the African captives before the United States Supreme Court. On March 9, 1841, the Supreme Court issued its final verdict in the Amistad Case – the captives were cleared of charges of murder and piracy. They were freed and they eventually returned to Africa.

While waiting for the outcome of the trial, wealthy African American abolitionist Robert Purvis (1810–98) commissioned a portrait of Cinqué from the white abolitionist painter Nathaniel Jocelyn (1796–1881). Jocelyn depicted

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 11–12.
16 Cabin boy quoted in Alexander 1984, 37.

Cinqué as both an African and a classical hero who stares from the canvas with a proud and dauntless look. Jocelyn left out Cinqué's tattoos on his arms and chest and dressed him in traditional Mende dress – a white cloth draped his body leaving his right arm and shoulder bare, while in one hand he holds a spear, a symbol of leadership. But, as Marcus Rediker has commented, »Jocelyn cleverly built double meanings into both: viewers of the painting might see the African leader as wearing a toga, like a virtuous Roman republican citizen, or as Moses, staff in hand, having led his compatriots back to the Promised Land.«[17] The white toga suggested that Cinqué's willingness to fight to the death for liberty embodied the virtues of Cato and other Roman Republican heroes who preferred death to bondage. Late eighteenth and early nineteenth century sculptors typically clad the Founding Fathers in classical dress to show their embrace of Roman Republican values; Jocelyn's use of the toga associated Cinqué with the nascent American Republic as well.

Jocelyn dared to paint Cinqué as a noble African, a radical departure from the usual demeaning ways Africans and African Americans were represented in art. In contrast to the dignity and strength of the leader of the revolt in Jocelyn's painting, Amasa Hewins' 1840 canvas of *The Death of the Captain of the Amistad, Capt. Ferrer*, engraved by John W. Barber, in keeping with the stereotypes of the times, depicted the killing of the captain and crew as bestial and brutal acts committed by barbarous Africans.

Purvis cherished the portrait of Cinqué, which hung above his desk in the sitting room of his home in Philadelphia. The Amistad Africans were »delighted« by the likeness of Cinqué and by his »imposing« attitude in the portrait. When he saw his own image, Cinqué exclaimed, »oh, good, good.«[18] Purvis had artist and engraver John Sartain (1808–97) of Philadelphia make an engraving and lithograph of the painting in 1841, and affordable ($2) copies were sold through the Pennsylvania Antislavery Association office.[19] One owner of a mezzotint wrote in the *Colored American*: »We shall be proud to have our apartments graced with the portrait of the noble Cinqué, and shall regard it as a favor to our descendants, to transmit to them his likeness. And who that has any humanity in his heart, or any veneration for a HERO, and who has any knowledge of this case, would not like to have this

17 Rediker 2012, 174–175.
18 Quoted ibid., 174.
19 »Portrait of Cinqué,« *Colored American*, 27 February 1841.

likeness about them?«[20] Frederick Douglass was another owner of a copy of Sartain's mezzotint, which hung in his library at his home in the Anacostia neighborhood of Washington, D. C.[21]
Some publications like the *Colored American* newspaper welcomed the connection between the Founding Fathers and the actions of the rebel slave:

> This noble hero, by his defense of liberty, has placed himself side by side with Patrick Henry, John Hancock, Thomas Jefferson, and Samuel and John Adams, fathers of the revolution. The justice of the nation has stood up in vindication of his deeds. How could they have done otherwise, with an example so illustrious as the American Revolution before them?[22]

And the New York Sun pointed out that

> Had he lived in the days of Greece or Rome, his name would have been handed down to posterity as one who had practiced those most sublime of all virtues – disinterested patriotism and unshrinking courage.[23]

To some viewers, Jocelyn's portrait suggested that Cinqué embodied both the virtues of Cato and other ancient Roman Republican heroes who preferred death to political slavery under Julius Caesar and the virtues of the Revolutionary generation who resisted the ›tyranny‹ of King George III. Cinqué's willingness to fight to the death to resist slavery, however, also gave a deeper, more basic meaning to the well-known rallying cry of the American Revolution, »Give me liberty, or give me death!« The painting of the toga-clad African American man exposed the hypocrisy of the revolutionary rhetoric of liberty in the face of the institution of slavery. Or, to put it another way, the painting and its Roman allusions made clear the vast difference between chattel slavery and slavery as a metaphor for political bondage.
Other Americans were outraged at the linkage between antiquity and the virtues of the Revolutionary generation with Africans. Many found the depiction of an African as a heroic warrior clad in Roman dress offensive. Jocelyn's painting was so controversial that it was banned from its inaugural showing: the Artists' Fund Society of Philadelphia refused to include the portrait in its annual exhibition. Jocelyn promptly resigned his honorary membership.[24]

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20 Rediker 2012, 174.
21 Gregory 1893, 208.
22 »Cinqué,« *Colored American*, March 27, 1841.
23 Quoted in »The Amistad Revolt: An Historical Legacy of Sierra Leone and the United State.« Accessed March 6, 2018. http://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/soc/amistad.pdf.
24 Alexander 1984, 32; 45.

John Neagle, president of the Artists' Fund Society, returned the portrait to Purvis along with a letter in which he wrote that it was »contrary to usage to display work of that character, [and] believing that under the excitement of the times, it might prove injurious both to the proprietors and the institution.« In response, abolitionist Henry Clarke Wright (1797–1870), a friend of Purvis, wrote a passionate letter to the Pennsylvania Freeman, a Philadelphia abolitionist newspaper, exposing the real reason the painting was not shown.

> The plain English of it is, Cinque is a NEGRO. This is a Negro-hating and negro-stealing nation. A slaveholding people. The negro-haters of the north, and the negro-stealers of the south will not tolerate a portrait of a negro in a picture gallery. And such a negro! His dauntless look, as it appears on canvas, would make the souls of the slaveholders quake. His portrait would be a standing anti-slavery lecture to slaveholders and their apologists. To have it in the gallery would lead to discussions about slavery and the »inalienable« rights of man, and convert every set of visitors into an anti-slavery meeting. So ›the hanging committee‹ bowed their necks to the yoke and bared their backs to the scourge, installed slavery as doorkeeper to the gallery, carefully to exclude everything that can speak of freedom and inalienable rights, and give offence to men-stealers!! Shame on them![25]

Purvis was more restrained in his criticism. He believed that the hanging committee rejected the portrait because Cinqué was a hero and »an African American man has no right to be a hero.«[26] An editorial in the abolitionist press pointedly noted the racist response of many to the actions of Cinqué, declaring »Had a white man done it, it would have been glorious. It would have immortalized him.«[27] But rather than praising him, the *New York Morning Herald* insisted that Cinqué was a »blubber-lipped, sullen-looking negro, not half as intelligent or striking in appearance as every third black you meet on the docks of New York.« Furthermore, Africans were »a distinct and totally different race, and the God of nature never intended that they should live together in any other relation than that of master and slave.«[28] Jocelyn's painting of a noble African American man–a Roman African, if you will, prepared to fight to the death for liberty–was too politically inflammatory to display.

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25 Neagle and Wright letters published in »The Hanging Committee of the Artists' Fund Society Doing Homage to Slavery,« *Philadelphia Pennsylvania Freeman*, April 21, 184, reprinted in the *New York Emancipator*, June 17, 1841, and quoted in Powell 1997, 65.

26 Purvis quoted in Honour 1989, 161.

27 Letter to the *Colored American*, September 28, 1839.

28 »The Captured Africans,« *New York Morning Herald*, September 17, 1839 and »The Amistad Africans in Prison,« *New York Morning Herald*, October 9, 1839.

Punica Fides?

> When I view that mighty son of Africa, HANNIBAL, one of the greatest generals of antiquity, who defeated and cut off so many thousands of the white Romans or murderers, and who carried his victorious arms, to the very gate of Rome, and I give it as my candid opinion, that had Carthage been well united and had given him good support, he would have carried that cruel and barbarous city by storm […] The person whom God shall give you, give him your support […] God will indeed, deliver you through him from your deplorable and wretched condition under the Christians of America.[29]

There were other ways to deploy the tropes of Roman history in the arguments for and against slavery in the nineteenth century. Anti-slavery activist David Walker invoked the Carthaginian general Hannibal in 1829 in his famous Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World. Mixing Roman and Christian references, he called white slave holders Romans, and anticipated that God would send African American slaves a Hannibal to overthrow the white Romans of his time. In striking contrast to the well-known and typical Roman criticism of perceived Carthaginian perfidy and treachery (*Punica fides*), Walker and other abolitionists chose to valorize Carthage and the most famous of Rome's enemies, Hannibal.[30]

From the late eighteenth century, abolitionists argued that modern African Americans were the descendants of the ancient Egyptians. Many abolitionists further argued that Hannibal and the Carthaginians and the eminent early North African church fathers were descendants of the ancient Egyptians.[31] David Walker identified with Carthage because it was an African empire ruthlessly sacked and destroyed by Rome, its inhabitants killed or sold into slavery. He appropriated Carthage's greatest general, Hannibal, who nearly defeated Rome, and turned him into a messianic hero for African Americans. When God sends a Hannibal to lead American slaves, Walker urged, they must unite and fight. If they do, they will defeat the white southern slave owners who are oppressing noble African Americans, the descendants of the Carthaginians. Steeped in the apocalyptic and messianic imagery wide-

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29 Walker 1995, 20.

30 *Punica fides,* the claim that Carthaginians were untrustworthy and apt to break oaths, treaties and all manner of promises, was a stereotype in Latin literature from the late Republic on. Erich Gruen's analysis of the stereotype, however, suggests that the Phoenician image in Latin literature was not monolithic but rather multivalent and multidimensional (Gruen 2011, 115–140). Livy 21.4.5–9, for example, has both admiration for and animosity toward Hannibal.

31 See Malamud 2016, 147–193 for an extended discussion of this identification.

spread during the Second Great Awakening, David Walker called upon his African American brethren to rise up and resist the tyrannical white Romans of the South.

Twenty years later as more members of the abolitionist movement began to consider the use of violence to end slavery, a man using the pseudonym »Hannibal« contributed a rousing editorial to *Frederick Douglass' Paper*

> Colored people have not only a natural right to liberty, but they are in duty bound to assert and maintain it […] Let the colored people everywhere assert their manhood…let the slavish doctrine of ›passive obedience and non-resistance‹ be thrown to the winds […][32]

»Hannibal's« call for resistance against slavery linked the right to liberty with the duty to fight for it, and his pseudonym reminded his readers of the noble African general who spent his life fighting against Rome. The modern »Hannibal« embraced a narrative of the American Revolution as a tale of men choosing to risk their lives to fight for their liberty, and through the fight, earning their liberty. The rhetoric of the American Revolution, as François Furstenberg has persuasively argued, left a »twinned legacy: a call to freedom linked with an obligation to resist […] A virtuous person would resist slavery, even at the cost of life itself.«[33] »Hannibal« and other abolitionists adapted this narrative and rhetorical stance for their purposes. For them, of course, slavery was not metaphorical political slavery, but chattel slavery. Asserting their »manhood« meant virtuous resistance to chattel slavery in the South and the oppression of free African Americans in the North. Passivity was tacit acquiescence to slavery and acceptance of African American social and political inequality.

William Wells Brown chose to emphasize the courage of the aristocratic Carthaginian wife of the general Hasdrubal who, according to the Roman historian Appian, killed herself and her children rather than submit to Roman capture and slavery. »Looking down and seeing her husband standing amongst the Roman officers,« Brown told his readers, »she loaded him with reproaches for what she conceived to be his cowardice, stabbed her children, threw them into the flames, and leaped in herself.« Brown also praised the

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32 Hannibal, »For Frederick Douglass' Paper,« *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, March 18, 1853.

33 Furstenberg 2003, 1302–1303; cf. Furstenberg 2006, 16–23; 192–218. In Furstenberg's words, a mythologized narrative of American Revolution transmitted »a belief that the Revolution was above all an act of resistance by a people threatened with slavery« (Furstenberg 2003, 1296).

spirit of Carthaginian women who »cut off their hair, and twisted and braided it into cords to be used as bowstrings for propelling the arrows which their husbands and brothers made.«[34] Similarly, in 1832, Sarah Mapps Douglass, a Quaker educator from Philadelphia, contributed three essays to William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist paper, the *Liberator*, under the pseudonym »Sophanisba.«[35] The historical Sophonisba, well known from Livy's account of the Second Punic War, was a Carthaginian princess who drank poison rather than be taken captive and paraded in a Roman triumph through the streets of Rome. Douglass, the daughter of African American abolitionists Robert and Grace Bustill Douglass, admired the pride and courage of the ancient Carthaginian woman.

In 1856, the slaves Margaret and Simon Garner and their four children escaped from their owner in Kentucky and crossed the frozen Ohio River to Cincinnati, Ohio. A posse tracked them down to their hiding place. As the men broke down the door, Margaret Garner, preferring death to slavery for her children, seized a knife and cut the throat of her daughter and tried to kill her other children. She and her husband were jailed and sent back to Kentucky into slavery. On her way back south, she tried to kill herself and one of her remaining children by jumping from a steamboat into the Ohio River. She was rescued but her daughter drowned. This is the story that inspired Toni Morrison to imaginatively recreate Garner's life in her 1987 novel *Beloved*. At the time, abolitionists invoked classical allusions to help make sense of her actions.

Margaret Garner was compared to Medea, the barbarian sorceress from beyond the Black Sea who murdered her two sons rather than let them live with her Greek husband, Jason, who had abandoned her for a Greek princess.[36] In 1867 Thomas Satterwhite Noble painted *Margaret Garner*. This was swiftly and widely circulated in a photolithograph woodcut entitled *The Modern Medea* published in *Harper's Weekly* (18 May 1867). Noble's painting portrays Garner as a noble victim rather than as a barbarian: it is slavery that is indicted, not the slave mother. Garner points defiantly to her dead

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34 Appian, *Roman History* 8.131. Brown 1970 (1874), 63. Brown (and others) may have been familiar with Felicia Hemans' 1819 popular poem »The Wife of Asdrubal« which offered a sympathetic interpretation of the actions of the Carthaginian matron.

35 Sophanisba, »Extract from a Letter,« *Liberator*, July 14, 1832; Sophanisba, »Ella: A Sketch,« *Liberator*, August 4, 1832 and Sophanisba, »Family Worship,« *Liberator*, September 8, 1832. She is commonly known today as »Sophonisba« but Livy and Appian (in Greek) have »Sophoniba«.

36 Discussed in Winterer 2007, 188–190.

children as if to say to the slavers »Here is your chattel!« One viewer of Noble's painting thought it of such significance that he believed it should be put in one of the panels of the rotunda of the National Capitol. »It tells in forcible lines the story of Margaret Garner, that dusky Medea, who cut the throat of her child to save it from falling into the hands of the slave-hunters, who were in pursuit of her.«[37] The comparison of Garner to Medea was connected to a European production of an adaptation of Euripides' tragedy that toured America to great acclaim in 1866–67. The play was a nineteenth-century adaptation of Euripides' *Medea* (*Médée*) by the French dramatist Ernest Legouvé (1807–1903). In this adaptation, Medea is stripped of her primal rage and jealousy. She is not monstrous—she kills her children so that they will not be taken away from her. Medea, as Joy S. Kasson has observed, »kills her children from an excess of maternal devotion.«[38] »There was never any doubt,« Fiona Macintosh has commented, »that her love for her children exceeds her hatred for Jason.«[39] In this interpretation of Euripides and in Noble's painting of Margaret Garner, both women were portrayed as mothers driven over the edge by threats to their children. That is why some who were sympathetic to Garner's actions could praise her as a heroic Medea. As Caroline Winterer has pointed out, Garner's contemporary, James Bell, understood her actions as noble and Roman in his 1856 poem, »Liberty or Death« where he compares her heroism to the Roman soldier Virginius, who, according to Livy, killed his daughter, Virginia, in order to save her from rape by the tyrannical patrician Appius Claudius. Bell writes,

> Go and ask of Margaret Garner,
> Why did she with a mother's hand,
> Deprive her child of breath!
> She'll tell you, with a Roman's smile,
> That slavery's worse than death […][40]

The comparison of Garner to Virginius allows Bell tacitly to associate slave owners with sexual excess as well as with the sin of slavery. Virginius killed his daughter »To screen her from a tyrant's lust, / A tyrant's foul control.«

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37 »The National Academy of Design,« *The Independent – Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic*, April 25, 1867.

38 Kasson 1990, 223.

39 Macintosh 2000, 15.

40 James Bell, »Liberty or Death,« *Provincial Freeman,* March 8, 1856. I am indebted to Winterer 2007, 186–87, for some of my discussion of Bell's poem.

Although Bell does not explicitly suggest that Margaret Garner killed her daughter to save her from rape, Garner, and Bell's readers, certainly knew that slavery for her daughter meant not only loss of liberty but also sexual exploitation by male slave owners.

In Livy's history, the killing of Virginia is the necessary though tragic sacrifice that inspired a political uprising, the ousting of a tyrannical regime and the restoration of the Roman Republic. Abolitionists, however, focused on Virginius' killing of his daughter to save her from slavery and rape and appropriated and allegorized this part of the Roman story to praise slaves who chose death for themselves or their loved ones rather than endure slavery. In a lecture before the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Salem, Massachusetts, William Wells Brown forced his female audience to compare this episode in Roman history with slavery in the South.

> What has the brother not done, upon the Slave-plantation, for the purpose of protecting the chastity of a dearly beloved sister? What has the father not done to protect the chastity of his daughter? What has the husband not done to protect his wife from the hands of the tyrant? They have committed murders. The mother has taken the life of her child, to preserve that child from the hands of the Slave-trader. The brother has taken the life of his sister, to protect her chastity. *As the noble Virginius seized the dagger and thrust it to the heart of the gentle Virginia, to save her from the hands of Appius Claudius of Rome, so has the father seized the deadly knife, and taken the life of his daughter, to save her from the hands of the master or of the Negro-driver.*[41]

Brown insisted his audience understand that female slaves had to endure sexual bondage to their white masters and he asked them to imagine how they might feel if the slave woman were their sister or daughter or mother. If Virginius was noble in killing his daughter to save her from the lust of Appius Claudius, is it not virtuous for the slave brother, father, or husband to commit the same deed on behalf of his loved one?

Brown, we find out in his 1855 memoir, knew well how the slave brother felt about his »dearly beloved sister.« In his memoir, Brown described the pain of his separation from his sister who had been sold to a man who was certain to sexually abuse her.

> On the following morning he [Brown] made another attempt, and was allowed to see her once, for the last time […] as soon as she observed him she sprang up, threw her arms around his neck, leaned her head upon his breast, and, without uttering a word, in silent, indescribable sorrow, burst into tears […] She said there

41 Brown and Parkhurst 1847, 5. My italics.

> was no hope for herself; she must live and die a slave […] Reader, did ever a fair sister of yours go down to the grave prematurely? If so, perchance you have drank deeply from the cup of sorrow. *But how infinitely better is it for a sister to »go into the silent land« with her honor untarnished, but with bright hopes, than for her to be sold to sensual slaveholders!* [42]

In Brown's heartrending account of his inability to save his sister from slavery, he seems to retrospectively wish that he could have done what Virginius did: save a loved one from slavery and certain sexual exploitation by death. In his view, the slave's experience of rape was worse than death. Brown could imagine committing such an awful act; it would be virtuous to save a loved one from American slavery.

After the northern victory in the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves, Joseph T. Wilson, a black veteran of the Union Army, published in 1887 *The Black Phalanx: A History of the Negro Soldiers of the United States*. Like the other roughly 200,000 black men who served in the Union Army, Wilson took up arms to fight for liberty for blacks and their children. He viewed the Civil War as part of a series of »great conflicts between freedom and slavery since the establishment of governments on earth.«[43] In his view, a major and noble example of the struggle between freedom and slavery could be found in the 5th century B.C. in the wars between Greece and Persia. Barry Strauss has observed that Wilson's references to the African American units in the United States Army as the »phalanx« units or »the phalanx« designates them rather than white soldiers »the true heirs of the heroism of ancient Greece.«[44] The hoplite phalanx was a Greek military formation in which the armed infantrymen (hoplites) line up in close order to each other, locking their shields together to make a human wall. A good hoplite in a phalanx is one who holds his ground, does not desert the battlefield, or more importantly his position in the line. »Men wear their helmets and their breastplates for their own needs,« wrote Plutarch, »but they carry shields for the men of the entire line.«[45] Success depended on fighting as one united and cohesive unit. It was the phalanx that enabled the Greeks to triumph in battle after battle against the Persian infantry. According to Wilson, it was the African American phalanx of the United States Army that won the war.

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42 Brown 1855, 17.
43 Wilson 1969 (1882), 99.
44 Strauss 2005, 42–43.
45 Plutarch, *Moralia* 241f6.

In Wilson's preface, he tells his readers he wrote his history to preserve »the memories of the past; of the bondage of a race and its struggle for freedom, awakening as they do the intense love of country and liberty, such as one who has been without either feels, when both have been secured by heroic effort«[46] From the point of view of the African Americans soldiers, the war at its most basic level was a fight for African American freedom. According to Wilson, a passionate desire for liberty fueled their efforts and made them the best soldiers in the United States Army. »Never was the fighting more heroic than that of the federal army and especially that of the Phalanx regiments,« he wrote, and African American soldiers in the army fought »with a dash and a gallantry excelled by no other race.«[47] »Where the conflict was hottest; where danger was most imminent, there the Phalanx went.«[48] Wilson described African American soldiers who fought for their freedom »dying with Spartan courage in the modern Thermopylae, the Crater at Petersburg.«[49] For him, what connected African American soldiers to the heroes of the Greek wars against Persia was »the shared desire for liberty,« the willingness on the part of both the Greeks and African American infantrymen to fight to the death with their fellow soldiers to avoid defeat and slavery, whether to despotic Persia or to the slave-holding South.[50]
Thermopylae remains the iconic western battle symbolizing the willingness of men to fight to the death for freedom.[51] It may seem odd and counterintuitive that free African Americans and their abolitionist supporters would frequently embrace the unabashedly slave-owning cultures of Greece and Rome and consciously and persistently cast themselves as their cultural and moral heirs. It is particularly ironic that Wilson would liken African American troops to the Spartans at Thermopylae, given Sparta's astonishingly brutal treatment of its helots. But as we have seen, the legacy of antiquity constituted real cultural capital, and African American activists had every incentive to appropriate, subvert and adapt it. For them, it was crucial to

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46 Wilson 1968 (1888), 6.
47 Ibid., 212.
48 Ibid., 315.
49 Wilson 1969, 141. The Battle of the Crater at Petersburg, Virginia, on July 30, 1864, is known as one of the Civil War's bloodiest struggles – a Union loss with combined casualties of approximately 5,000 men, many of whom were members of the United States Colored Troops under Brigadier General Edward Ferrero.
50 Strauss 2005, 43.
51 For a thorough discussion of this iconic battle, see Cartledge 2007.

maintain that African American soldiers who fought and died in the Civil War were nothing less than the modern descendants of Leonidas and the Spartans who died at Thermopylae.

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