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SHAKESPEARE AND BLACK MASCULINITY IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA:
SLAVE REVOLTS AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF REVOLUTIONARY BLACKNESS

by

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I. Introduction

In 1789, one freedman wrote in an abolitionist letter: “Has not a negro eyes? Has not a negro hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?” (Nathans 54). The writer adapts perhaps the most famous lines of *The Merchant of Venice* (Shakespeare 1605), Shylock’s appeal to Jewish humanity in the sixteenth century, to an argument for black humanity in nineteenth century America. Antebellum writers invoked Shakespeare because of his status as a prominent English writer and the recognizable nature of his works. However, Shakespeare’s role in American political texts positions a British writer in the context of American freedoms. When this writer uses *The Merchant of Venice* rhetorically, he does not just make a literary allusion to Shakespeare, but uses Shakespeare to advocate for a political goal: the abolition of slavery. Black and white abolitionists referenced Shakespeare plays that discuss minorities, like *The Merchant of Venice* or *Othello*, to argue for the humanity of slaves. Using Shakespeare in their political writings also allowed black writers to establish a common language with the white audiences they were often addressing. This thesis will focus on how writers used Shakespeare as a framing device for discussions of black masculinity. I will use *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831) and Frederick Douglass’ “The Heroic Slave” (1855) as case studies for how writers used Shakespeare to frame black violence.

As these two texts deal explicitly with violent revolt, they provide an interesting look at how this cultural reference point operates as method for framing black violence. In coding rebellions, both writers have different agendas and methods: Douglass seeks to glorify Madison Washington as a revolutionary while Gray frames Nat as a criminal. Douglass’ explicit references to Shakespeare allow him to exalt Madison Washington’s

revolt. Gray, on the other hand, echoes Shakespeare to condemn both Nat and his rebellion. Both texts invoke this prominent British writer in order to present opposing views of black violence in America.

These two texts, both together and separately, have not received extensive attention from literary criticism. While some scholars of American and African American history have written about *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, they tend to focus upon the revolt and the unusual nature of Nat's testimony, rather than the text as a rhetorical piece shaped by Gray.¹ Very little scholarship focuses at all on "The Heroic Slave," perhaps because it is Douglass' only fiction or perhaps because scholars tend to emphasize Douglass' autobiographical narratives such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*. "The Heroic Slave" tends to get a mention attached to either narrative or Douglass' speeches when scholars write about Douglass, but it rarely gets singular attention.²

Eric Sundquist is one of the few scholars to place Nat and Douglass in conversation with one another in the first chapter of his book *To Wake the Nations* (1993). He does discuss "The Heroic Slave," by first addressing how it "may be read as Douglass' own 'autograph for freedom,' the signature of his declaration of liberty through escalating acts of literacy and rebellion" (Sundquist 115). Douglass' rebellious acts of literacy become the focus for Sundquist. Yet, "literacy" does not completely describe what Douglass does by turning to fiction. Of course, a former slave to writing fiction rebels against the efforts to prevent the education of slaves. Douglass radicalizes his writing by employing fiction

1 While I will certainly discuss the history of Nat Turner's rebellion, for a more in depth historical analysis, see Aptheker chapter 12.

2 Although Douglass' narratives certainly inform how this thesis treats "The Heroic Slave," I will not directly incorporate any of Douglass' other writings.

and Shakespeare, in order to situate his work within a longer literary history. Sundquist does extensively address the slave violence depicted in “The Heroic Slave,” but does not discuss how the violence Douglass writes about intersects with Douglass’ literariness. While Douglass’ own motivations are an aspect of what I wish to examine in “The Heroic Slave” and his motivations for turning to fiction in particular are interesting, Sundquist follows the trend of grouping “The Heroic Slave” with Douglass’ autobiographical texts without giving Douglass’ turn to fiction sufficient attention. It is Douglass’ genre choice and Shakespearean literariness that allow him to frame Madison Washington as a revolutionary hero, not a criminal. Instead of looking at the violence as a reflection of Douglass’ own life or agenda, this essay will examine how Douglass uses Shakespeare to make slave violence revolutionary.

To do so, this thesis will begin by outlining the role of Shakespeare in early and Antebellum America. Looking at Shakespeare in American history illustrates how Shakespeare came to be a point of cultural reference for both black and white Americans. However, abolitionist writers use Shakespeare as more than an allusion, but as part of a political argument for abolition. The tension beneath invoking a British writer in arguments about upholding the principles of the American Revolution allowed abolitionists to expose these American ideals as unfulfilled.

I will address how the trope of Othello framed Nat in the *Confessions of Nat Turner* and how Shakespeare can shed light on how Gray presented Nat as a criminal. By looking at how Shakespeare’s *Othello* constituted a shared cultural language for most white—and black—Americans, I will argue that both texts present violent black men who cross racial barriers as a danger to society. Reading the *Confessions* with the cultural

context of *Othello* presents this white anxiety in the realm of cultural power while also allowing whites to define the power of black men as theft and heresy.

After examining how Gray frames Nat as a criminal, I will explore how Douglass' abolitionist novella, reclaims another slave revolt leader as an American hero through the shared cultural language of Shakespeare. Douglass uses this British writer to frame slave violence as revolutionary, not criminal. His fictitious take on the life of Madison Washington relies on a Shakespearean model of heroism in order to craft a heroic black man that white Americans might understand. I will address how Douglass uses the British literary canon to present Madison Washington as an excluded hero from the American canon. Addressing these two different Antebellum texts allows this thesis to look at the different ways that writers used Shakespeare as an accessible cultural reference point to discuss racial violence.

Yet, when one thinks of Shakespearean studies, American abolitionists rarely come to mind. Both the study of Shakespeare in this thesis and the use of Shakespeare discussed certainly differ from how one typically imagines Shakespeare. In fact, the texts themselves invoke Shakespeare for opposite purposes. Although many abolitionists texts, like the letter cited at the beginning of this essay that uses *The Merchant of Venice*, rely upon Shakespeare plays that deal with minorities to provide models for black men, neither Douglass nor Gray follows this trend. Douglass rejects the limiting framework of a Shylock or an Othello in favor of illuminating Madison Washington's innate heroism while Gray echoes Othello in order to criminalize Nat. My aim in this thesis is to address the divergent ways writers used Shakespeare to frame violent black masculinity as either criminal or revolutionary.

II. Shakespeare in America

To fully understand how Shakespeare interacts with ideas of black masculinity in “The Heroic Slave” and the *Confessions of Nat Turner*, it is important to address how Shakespeare operated in the American imagination.³ Harvard College’s acquisition of a six-volume edition of Shakespeare’s works in 1723 suggests Shakespeare’s importance and represents the first record of Shakespeare’s use in early American education. Harvard catalogued their edition of Shakespeare’s works into a collection among seminal classical and theological works for advanced students (Mylander 35). The specific cataloguing of Shakespeare at Harvard indicates that the college considered Shakespeare to be a foundational part of a college education. Some Founding Fathers of the United States took particular interest in Shakespeare as well: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson made a pilgrimage to Shakespeare’s hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon together in 1786, although Adams noted in his diary that nothing is “preserved of this great genius which is worth knowing” (Schlochauer 159). The disappointment in his trip to Stratford-upon-Avon, however, did not prevent Adam’s admiration as he argued that Shakespeare’s “wit, fancy, his taste, and judgment, his knowledge of nature, of life and character, are immortal” (Schlochauer 159). Clearly, at least among the upper classes, Shakespeare remained essential to the American imagination even directly after the Revolutionary War.

Even though scholars are largely able to understand Shakespeare’s role in educated and upper class circles within colonial American society, uncovering Shakespeare in the

³ A detailed account of Shakespeare’s role in early American reading is difficult to explore as records of private library holdings and cheaply printed volumes are both sparse. However, to learn more about Shakespeare in colonial America, see Nathans.

lives of average colonial Americans poses some challenges. Scholars reasonably argue that Shakespeare's plays may have been circulated in cheap forms, as many British texts were, and that even illiterate colonists would have been exposed through communal readings or theatrical productions (Mylander 38). While there is no definitive evidence of widespread seventeenth or eighteenth-century readings, Shakespeare plays appeared in theaters and classrooms as Shakespeare's plays became central to elocution lessons in nineteenth-century America. In the American imagination, Shakespeare was seen as a writer and an orator. Emerson in particular described Shakespeare as "a full man, who liked to talk" (Emerson 210). The enhanced role of Shakespeare in the nineteenth century may even suggest that Shakespearean knowledge was important even before there were widespread records of Shakespeare's presence in the lives of average Americans.

The idea that John Adams emphasized, Shakespeare's immortal connection to "knowledge...of life and character," was used by African Americans, particularly freed slaves, as they harnessed Shakespeare as a shared cultural reference point to argue for their fundamental humanity. Both this idea of Shakespeare capturing humanity and the role of Shakespeare in accepted American thought made Shakespearean study an essential aspect of education for freed black children and adults. Eighteenth and nineteenth century schools and educational societies for free African Americans emphasized elocution and oral proficiency in the white American dialect (Nathans 56). While it is difficult to find exact records of which texts were used in these schools and elocution lessons, Shakespeare's texts were central to elocution lessons for white Americans and were most likely included in these early schools for freedmen (Nathans 56). Thus, it would be more surprising to discover that schools for free African

Americans excluded Shakespeare as his works were considered essential to American elocution.

Later works by African American writers seem to affirm the claim that most educated African Americans were exposed to Shakespeare. In an article in the first black newspaper in the United States, *Freedom Journal*, one writer wrote of his use of the word “changeling”: “It may be considered impertinent were I to explain what is meant by a changeling; both Shakespeare and Spencer have already done so, and who is there unacquainted with the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the *Fairy Queen*?” (Nathans 57). Educated African Americans were assumed, within their own community of freedmen, to be familiar with Shakespeare’s plays and language.

However, Shakespeare represented more than just a shared language among educated African Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Abolitionist texts written by African Americans also harnessed the language of Shakespeare while addressing white audiences. Shakespeare became a way for free African Americans to attempt to sway the educated, white elites towards abolition. In the *American Museum* letter cited at the beginning of this essay, a black writer uses the *Merchant of Venice* to argue for freedom.⁴ He adapts Shylock’s famous speech⁵ to an appeal for African American humanity by rhetorically connecting his arguments to the humanity men such as John Adams have found to be universal. This writer also specifically addresses the role of his own education in his abolitionist activism: “The first thing which seems necessary in order to remove those prejudices which are so justly entertained against us is to prove that we are men...I learn from writers who Europeans hold in highest esteem...that to

4 For this writer’s version of the speech, see page 2 of this essay or Nathans 54.

5 For Shylock’s speech on Jewish humanity, see *The Merchant of Venice* Act 3 Scene 1.

deliver oneself and one's countrymen from tyranny is an act of sublimest heroism" (Nathans 55). The writer uses commonly recognizable European writers and texts, like Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, to argue for abolition and inherent black humanity.

How Shakespeare operated as a shared cultural connection between white and black Americans presented writers with an opportunity to frame an abolitionist argument in a nearly universal context. One could assume all Americans with a basic level of education were familiar with Shakespeare and his works. Shakespeare in particular, as opposed to other British writers, might have appealed to black abolitionists because of the attention he gave to psychological matters and the nature of humanity. American intellectuals like John Adams clearly recognized and admired the way Shakespeare approached the idea of inherent humanity. While many other British writers would have been familiar to African American writers, Shakespeare also addressed racial issues and what it means to be human in a fairly nuanced way for his time. For example, *The Jew of Malta* by Christopher Marlowe plays his main character Barabas' Jewish attributes almost exclusively as sinister and humorous while Shakespeare's Shylock orates on equality and anti-Semitism.⁶

Even though plays like *The Merchant of Venice* or *Othello* could certainly also be staged in order to mock minorities, they also provide the space to perform race and religion in dynamic and humanizing ways. Mary Z. Maher, in her study of modern Hamlets claims that plays represent "a place for opening options rather than closing them...the text is not a fait accompli but a springboard for performance solutions. How

⁶ This essay does not go into the debate about anti-Semitism in Shakespeare and Marlowe's respective plays, but for more information on this, see Hotine 35-38.

an actor chooses to express a line is part of what makes his profession a creative process” (Maher xxv). While Maher discusses the interpretive nature of acting in order to address different Hamlets, her ideas about acting as a creative process present a compelling explanation for why Shakespeare’s plays appealed to abolitionists. Because the theater allows for interpretation, Shakespeare’s plays provided abolitionists with the ideal framework and ideas to stage their own arguments. Unlike Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, *The Merchant of Venice* contained speeches about universal humanity that could be interpreted by writers in terms of abolition. As they likely recognized Shakespeare’s references to race and the nature of humanity, Shakespeare provided them with the material needed to argue for racial justice. In another *American Museum* letter, an African American writer used the penname “Othello” to publish his argument for abolition. In assuming the role of Othello, he used both the language of the American Revolution and Othello’s dignity to present his appeal for abolition to white readers (Nathans 54). He condemns the institution of slavery as antithetical to the ideals of the United States, writing, “Blush, ye revolted colonies, for having apostatized from your principles” (Bruce 76). Therefore, writers could use the minority roles Shakespeare wrote to argue for black humanity.

Gray invokes *Othello* in order to do exactly the opposite of what “Othello” does in his letter. His use of the Othello trope aims to criminalize Nat and argue in favor of American slavery. Although Gray does not explicitly reference Shakespeare in the *Confessions of Nat Turner*, the way that he frames Nat’s criminality practically copies how Shakespeare portrays Othello as criminal. By addressing the similar framing

devices, Gray's presentation of Nat as a threat to white America can be read in terms of the Othello trope.

I will argue that similar claims to those harnessed in the *American Museum* letter can be seen in Douglass' "The Heroic Slave" as well as the *Confessions of Nat Turner*. Shakespeare's role as a shared cultural reference point and how Americans were encouraged to view race through Shakespeare allows for an analysis of how slave revolts and black masculinity were presented in Antebellum Literature. Douglass does not address more controversial plays that deal with race and ethnicity like the *Merchant of Venice* or *Othello* and instead uses *Henry VI Part 2*. He uses Shakespearean history play to frame his fiction while using some Shakespearean characteristics. By doing so, he taps into the shared culture without limiting his characterization of Madison Washington with that the model of an Othello.

III. Framing Turner as an Othello

In the letter by "Othello," he claims, "Slavery, unquestionably, should be abolished, particularly in this country; because it is inconsistent with the declared principles of the American Revolution. The sooner, therefore, we set about it, the better" ("Othello" 53). Pro-slavery advocates such as Thomas Gray, however, did not share Othello's view of slavery as a threat to the principles of the American Revolution. Instead, Gray believed that slave uprisings were the true threat to American society. And while the writer used the name Othello for powerful rhetorical effect, the recognition of Othello as a dignified hero was not universal in America. Othello's "turning Turk" could easily be interpreted by racist audiences as a black man who deteriorates into a brutal savage after living above a station his white society believes he deserves. Thus, in addressing the use of

Shakespeare as a way to frame black violence, I turn to Othello in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831) and to how Gray's introduction of Nat resembles how Iago and other white characters present Othello. As Gray's text is a record of Nat's legal confession, the text is already placed in a criminal context and the framing Gray sensationalizes this context. The comparison to framing in *Othello* is not direct, but instead relies upon the idea of Othello as a common trope by this point in American and English literature. I do not claim that Gray even had *Othello* in mind when penning his pamphlet, but instead that his commentary plays into the Othello trope.

Before looking at Gray's fashioning of the text, I will outline the terms that will be important when discussing the incident that gave Nat his infamous place in American history and the background on the revolt itself. Terminology is incredibly important here because both Gray and Douglass use Shakespeare to label the violence they describe as criminal or revolutionary. Thus, the terms used have political implications. While the terms "revolt," "rebellion," "revolution," and "insurrection" have all been used to describe the events aboard the *Creole* as well as the actions Nat Turner participated in and instigated in Southampton, this thesis will primarily rely on "revolt" and "rebellion" rather than "revolution" or "insurrection."⁷ Arguing that both incidents were revolutionary would not in fact be difficult, however, I argue that "revolution" and "revolutionary" are not the same. "Revolution" implies a scale that neither incident had, while their impacts on American culture were indeed "revolutionary." "Insurrection" can carry a negative connotation and was adopted by white writers such as Gray to

⁷ Eric Sundquist also discusses which terminology he uses and argues for the validity of using "revolt," "rebellion," or "insurrection," but chooses to use "revolt" for his paper. This thesis has certainly been influenced by that choice. While I think it is essential to be careful about how one describes these events, there is no criticism of the actions of Nat Turner or of Madison Washington intended by my word choice.

criminalize slave revolts. This thesis intends to address how the common cultural point of Shakespeare in America allows for black rebellion to be criminal or political. As a result, the terminology used reflects the framing these different authors hope to achieve.

Slave revolts in the United States, which are the subjects of both texts examined in this thesis, were both less numerous and frequent than they were in the Caribbean or in South America (McKivigan and Harrold 4). The absence of frequent rebellions, however, did not prevent white communities from fearing such revolts. During the American Revolution, for instance, John Adams wrote in his diary about Southern delegates' fear that the British might try to use slaves held in the South against their masters by promising them freedom (Aptheker 21). Despite the fact that slave revolts were indeed rare in the United States, anxieties about such revolts permeated Southern white society even before the Revolutionary War and certainly continued to persist after the Revolution.

Thus, the rebellions that are the subjects of the two texts this thesis analyzes were not common occurrences, but they did profoundly impact both white and black views of anti-slavery violence. Nat Turner's revolt in Southampton, VA in particular led to increased anxieties about slave revolts. The revolt was planned for July 4, 1831, but Nat reportedly fell ill and they delayed their plans until August 13, 1831 (Morris 30). Nat Turner's group of ultimately around 70 rebels killed between 55-65 white people, but the rebellion was suppressed and led to mob violence that killed over 100 African Americans (Aptheker 301). Turner and all other leaders of the rebellion were hung, but Turner gave a confession to Thomas R. Gray prior to his trial and execution. Primary sources for the events of the revolt itself and the resulting fallout are sparse (Tomlins 747). *The*

Confessions represents one of the most complete accounts of the revolt, but it cannot be relied upon as a definitive source. Even if one considered the text to be completely accurate, one source with little corroboration cannot be considered the answer to historians' questions. While the court documents assert that Turner himself affirmed his confession at trial, this point could be unreliable as well because of racial bias in courts at the time. However, the strong fears among white Southern Americans after the revolt and the larger impact of Nat's actions upon slaveholders can be observed through reports of anxiety and chaos all over the slaveholding South (Morris 29). Some places in the United States, such as New Orleans, felt the need to institute new legislation in reaction to Nat's revolt: New Orleans passed an ordinance that allowed "slaveowners to bring their blacks to the city jail to be 'disciplined' by the city jailor for twenty-five cents" (Schafer 365). Thus, despite the lack of records, Nat's revolt and its depiction—especially Gray's account—deeply impacted the South.

When discussing the text of Nat Turner's confessions specifically, the debate over voice and authorship must be addressed. Some scholars like Sundquist argue for Turner's voice in the text. Sundquist claims, "Modern cultural readings of Turner's confessions (most of which appeared in the wake of the great controversy around William Styron's 1967 fictionalization of Turner's narrative, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*) have typically placed the greatest emphasis on the unreliability of Thomas R. Gray's narrative" (Sundquist 37). He argues that modern readings focus on Gray's representation of Turner as a religious fanatic to the extent of ignoring Turner's narrative. While Sundquist acknowledges that there is some doubt over whether "we may provisionally ascribe authorial intention to his text" (Sundquist 42), Sundquist consistently argues for Turner's

authorial role over Gray's. He posits that even if Gray must be given primary authorship, "it is never possible *not* to read it also as Turner's" (Sundquist 43). While I agree that it is impossible to exclude Turner's voice from the text entirely, this thesis differs from Sundquist's approach by focusing on how Gray frames Turner's confessions. Instead of attempting to piece together which parts of the narrative can be attributed to Gray and which to Nat, as other scholars have, this thesis will focus on Gray's rhetorical strategy given the context of Gray's white audience.⁸

In introducing the confession, Gray carefully situates Turner's statements within a framework of crime and madness. Gray's commentary strikingly mirrors the language used by some of Shakespeare's white Venetian characters to describe Othello in *Othello*. Othello transgresses racial expectations by marrying a white woman while Nat does so by leading a violent uprising. Even though Shakespeare's *Othello* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner* were written centuries and an ocean apart, the figures of Othello and Nat Turner both represent powerful black men who are criminalized for their power. In particular, Gray frames his text by relying on language of criminality almost directly pulled from *Othello* to undermine the ideas of freedom that Nat's violent revolt aimed to achieve.

Before Othello graces the stage, Shakespeare uses other characters to present his titular character as a thief. Shakespeare harnesses discourses of theft when portraying white characters' reactions to Othello's marriage to Desdemona, a white Venetian woman. Othello begins the play as a general in the Venetian army, but his position of power is not his violent transgression. The text instead argues that Othello violates his society's norms

⁸ For more on the issue of authorship in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and different readings of voice in the text, see Harriss 137-170.

when he acts upon the status of his position as a white general would—by establishing his social standing through marriage. When Iago notifies Desdemona’s father, Barbantio, of his daughter’s secret marriage, Iago says, “Zounds, sir, you’re robbed. For shame, put on your / gown! / Your heart is burst. You have lost half your soul. / Even now, now, very now, an old back ram / Is tugging your white ewe. Arise, arise! Awake the snoring citizens...Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you” (Shakespeare I.i.94-100). Iago immediately presents Othello’s marriage as a theft on racial grounds—Iago defines the danger as miscegenation.

Similarly employing this framework of theft in his introduction, Gray presents Nat as a bandit. Gray introduces Nat’s revolt by deeming it “the first instance in our history of an open rebellion of the slaves, and attended with such atrocious circumstances of cruelty and destruction, as could not fail to leave a deep impression” (*The Confessions* 40). He not only considers Nat’s actions to be “atrocious,” but also calls Nat a thief, referring to him as “[t]his ‘great Bandit’” (*The Confessions* 40). Instead of calling him a murderer immediately, Gray positions Nat within the language of theft—Gray primarily objects to Nat’s attempt to steal freedom, religion, and white power. By using the framework of theft, Gray employs the model of Othello to introduce Nat’s transgressions as criminal because of what they take from white men. Even though Gray may not have been referencing *Othello* or considering the play while depicting Nat as a thief, Shakespeare’s nearly identical method of introducing Othello’s transgression allows the reader to place Nat within the context of commonly understood violent depictions of black men.

In addition to shaping Nat’s confessions through the language of theft, Gray’s other main strategy for manipulating Nat’s confessions uses religion to portray Nat as a mad

heretic. Before addressing how this framing operates in Gray's text, I will examine how this representation of a violent black man as a religious aberration too echoes Othello's characterization. The play does not stop at calling Othello a thief and instead Iago tells Barbantio that Othello is the devil, staging Othello as a threat to Desdemona and her family's Christianity. Even before he graces the stage, Othello's association with heresy and magic begins with the language used in Barbantio's reaction to the idea that "the devil will make a grandsire of you." Barbantio assumes that the only way his daughter could have married Othello is if he enchanted her: "O treason of the blood...Is there not charms / By which the property of youth and maidhood / May be abused?" (Shakespeare I.i.191-195). At first, it may seem plausible, despite Iago's racially coded language, that Barbantio merely responds in outrage at his daughter's sudden elopement and the language of magic in these lines comes from the character's shock.

Yet, the "treason of the blood" refers to more than Desdemona simply betraying her family. Because Barbantio only refers to Othello as "the Moor" and bemoans that Roderigo—the Venetian—had not "had her," the text makes it clear that Othello's race is the real source of outrage (Shakespeare I.i.198). The "treason of the blood" that enrages Barbantio is Desdemona betraying her race by marrying the other. He can only understand his daughter's elopement by believing that "the Moor" enchanted her. By using language of magic to refer to Othello's interracial marriage, the text uses stereotypes about Eastern religious traditions to present a union that threatens racial and Christian norms.

While Othello never identifies his own religion, the text presents his Christianity as an insincere identity. As Iago's manipulation of Othello continues throughout the play,

Othello gradually turns to magic, rejecting his assumed Christianity. Iago introduces Othello's Christian identity as precarious when discussing how he plans to manipulate Othello and Desdemona:

For 'tis most easy
Th' inclining Desdemona to subdue
In any honest suit...
To win the Moor—were't to renounce his baptism,
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin—
His soul is so en fettered to her love
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,
Even as her appetite shall play the god
With his weak function (Shakespeare II.iii.359-368).

In this soliloquy, Iago presents the audience with the first affirmation of Othello's religion, but only within the context of Othello as a weak convert. Iago claims that Othello would "renounce his baptism, / All seals and symbols of redeemed sin" for his wife in order to present Othello's religion—and marriage—as suspect. The text positions Othello and Desdemona's relationship as a threat to Othello's baptism and Christianity. Over the course of Iago's manipulations, Othello increasingly turns to magic. He originally rejects Barbantio's claims that he enchanted Desdemona and seems to affirm his Christianity: "I will a round unvarnished tale deliver / Of my whole course of love— what drugs, what / charms, / What conjuration, and what mighty magic / (For such proceedings I am charged withal) / I won his daughter" (I.iii.106-111). By harnessing Barbantio's rhetoric Othello mocks both his father-in-law's perspective and magic itself. In doing so, Othello asserts his rights within the rational framework of addressing a formal accusation. But after a series of interferences and schemes by Iago, when he discovers that Desdemona lost his handkerchief, Othello abandons his reasoned rhetoric for prophecy: "There's magic in the web of it. / A sybil that had numbered in the world...

In her prophetic fury sewed the work. / The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk, / And it was dyed in mummy, which the skillful / Conserved of maiden's hearts" (Shakespeare III.iv.81-87). Through the language of prophecy—"magic," "sybil," and "prophetic fury"—the text exposes Othello's heretical reliance upon false prophecy. In both his marriage and station in Venice, Othello becomes increasingly reliant on false prophecy as the text distinguishes him from white Christian Venetians.

In *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Gray relies upon a similar strategy to present Nat as unreliable and heretical as he records Nat claiming to actually be a Christian prophet. Given that *The Confessions of Nat Turner* claims to be a factual legal document, I will not be able to analyze the way other characters depict Nat in the way that other characters frame Othello. By addressing Gray's tone and reaction to Nat's supposed assertions, I will address the role of Nat as a prophet as Gray's characterization in a way that builds upon how Othello's religion is questioned and exploited by the white characters, Iago in particular. In Gray's "To the Public" section, he introduces Nat as a fanatic: "It will thus appear, that...a gloomy fanatic was revolving in the recesses of his own dark, bewildered, and overwrought mind, schemes of indiscriminate massacre to the whites" (*The Confessions* 41). Before any of Nat's supposed testimony, Gray presents his white readers with an insane fanatic who wants to kill people like them. Gray goes on to claim that "His [Nat's] own account of the conspiracy is submitted to the public without comment" (*The Confessions* 41), but Gray clearly frames Nat's confession in an effort to discredit him. Although he clearly sets up Nat as a danger to the white population and to society, Gray goes to great lengths to prompt his reader to doubt Nat, choosing phrases such as "If Nat's statements can be relied on" (*The Confessions* 41). By framing Nat's statements

with doubt, alarm, and anger, Gray prepares his reader to meet an insane, heretical version of the Othello trope.

The text introduces Nat's belief that he is a prophet at the very beginning of his confession with commentary from Gray:

I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth. And my father and mother strengthened me in this my first impression, saying in my presence, I was intended for some great purpose, which they had always thought from certain marks on my head and breast—[a parcel of excrescences which I believe are not at all uncommon, particularly among negroes, as I have seen several with the same. In this case he has either cut them off or they have nearly disappeared] (*The Confessions* 44).

Beginning with this description of Nat, not with his violent acts as the title "Confessions" might suggest, presents an interesting rhetorical strategy. While it may very well be true that Nat began his confession by discussing how his life led up to the rebellion, Gray considered it valuable enough to include in Nat's confession for court and publication. By starting with claims of heresy rather than descriptions of abject violence, as might be assumed, Gray presents Nat as a deranged slave with ideas that threaten Christianity and white supremacy. Despite the fact that most readers would have been skeptical of a slave's claim to prophecy, Gray feels the need to mock and explicitly reject Nat's claims. In the brackets, Gray inserts his commentary—although his tone throughout the passage can be read as sufficient criticism—in order to emphasize the fanaticism Gray projects upon any profession of Nat's Christianity. He calls the marks Nat claims designate him as a prophet "excrescences," which suggests disease and abnormal growths. By using the language of illness, Gray presents Nat's Christian theology as perverse and perhaps contagious. Through inserting his own commentary in Nat's confession, Gray's framing

continues into the confession itself—Gray never lets his readers forget that Nat is dangerous and deluded.

The text of *The Confessions* furthers the connection between Nat’s prophetic claims and his ability to start the uprising in Southampton by detailing violent prophecies. Nat claims that a prophecy prompted him to return instead of running away from his master: “I had a vision—and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened...and blood flowed in streams—I heard a voice saying, ‘Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it’ (*The Confessions* 46). His prophecy told him to remain with his master so that he could fulfill his vision of such a battle between black and white spirits. The sensationally violent language of this prophecy, however, presents the reader with an explicitly physical—not spiritual—vision of violence.

When continuing to pursue these prophecies, Gray presents the reader with more sensational and gory details. As with Othello’s handkerchief that was dyed by bloody hearts, the text features the blood included in discussions of Nat’s prophecies as Eastern and in opposition to Christianity: “while laboring in the field, I discovered drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven...I then found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters, and numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood” (*The Confessions* 47). Even though Nat interprets these as messages from the Holy Spirit, the use of both excessive gore and reference to “hieroglyphic characters, and numbers” distances Nat’s prophecies from traditional Christian practices, particularly in America.⁹ Although Nat claims that sharing his prophecy with a white man

⁹ The use of hieroglyphics may place Nat very much in line with the Transcendentalists. This connection could be read in a variety of ways: a reader might see Nat’s intelligence coming through the text or may see this as Gray further connecting Turner to corrupting

healed the man by causing blood to ooze from the pores of his skin, this extremely bloody imagery does not fit neatly within a familiar Christian framework for Antebellum American audiences. Instead, the text uses Nat's violent prophecies to frame his violence in the revolt within the context of his perversions of Christianity.

By depicting Nat in the terms of false prophecy and theft, Gray relies upon a recognizable trope to undermine the validity of a powerful black man. As Nat fights for freedom and Othello attempts to reject racial norms in order to assert his equality and right to Desdemona's hand, the two characters are coded as thieves after white power and threats to Christianity. Even though both are heavily mocked—whether it is by characters or the writer—their transgressions represent radical ideas about racial equality for their respective time periods. By using a recognizable framework to portray Nat, Gray aims to label Nat's ideas and efforts towards freedom as criminal. In connecting Nat to the nearly universally recognizable figure of Othello, Gray establishes Nat as a heretical criminal, not a revolutionary.

IV. Finding Freedom at a British Port: Soliloquy and Masculinity in “The Heroic Slave”

Frederick Douglass, however, seeks to do exactly the opposite of what Gray does with Nat by establishing Madison Washington as a revolutionary and a hero. Through his own framing, Douglass presents slave violence as revolutionary rather than criminal. Douglass portrays the revolt aboard the *Creole* in his novella. The revolt itself occurred in 1841 as the *Creole*, an American ship, transported slaves from Richmond to New Orleans. The abolitionist texts. Regardless, like how the Transcendentalists viewed hieroglyphics, the meaning of the text is nearly impossible to parse here. Even if one believes the mention of hieroglyphics indicates Nat's level of education, Gray's inclusion of this may instead be in an effort to other and dismiss Nat.

Creole left Virginia on October 30, 1841 and after a revolt led by Madison Washington, the ship landed in Nassau, Bahamas which was a British colony (Hyde 479).

While Madison Washington wanted to take the ship to Liberia after defeating the crew with knives and clubs, there were not sufficient provisions and they instead coerced a guard with seafaring experience to take them to the British port of Nassau (Downey 13). As scholar Carrie Hyde notes, the revolt aboard the *Creole* appealed to abolitionists like Douglass because it allowed freedom to be presented as a natural right and because it exemplified what should be happening on American soil (Hyde 478). The 135 slaves were freed not because of international law, but because of British law. By using this case, abolitionists could simultaneously argue for a natural right to freedom and critique America for being behind the very nation it left in order to pursue liberty in bestowing that right upon black people. The *Creole* revolt is largely considered the most successful slave revolt in American history as 135 slaves were freed.

Although this revolt also left an immense impact upon the United States, it did not instill the same fears or characterizations as Nat's revolt. Part of why this revolt did not receive the same backlash from white Americans is because it only involved the death of one white man. The revolt itself was distanced from the public and less easy for the average slave-owner to imagine occurring on their plantation. Thus, abolitionists capitalized upon the opportunity to reframe black violence in terms of a quest for liberty, rather than criminal acts. While Shakespeare's *Othello* allows for an interesting analysis of how white writers like Gray might construct revolutionary black men, Frederick Douglass directly incorporates Shakespeare into his fictional depiction of the *Creole* revolt. His different use of Shakespeare also reflects how Douglass reframes slave

violence as revolutionary rather than criminal. Douglass' title, "The Heroic Slave, a heartwarming Narrative of the Adventures of Madison Washington, In Pursuit of Liberty," reveals the different tone abolitionists were able to achieve with Madison Washington as opposed to Nat's ascribed criminality.

Over the course of the novella, Madison Washington is presented through the perspective of a white man, Mr. Listwell. Listwell secretly observes Madison Washington's soliloquy and five years later shelters Madison Washington after he ran away from his master's plantation. Listwell helps Madison Washington escape to freedom in Canada, but Madison Washington soon returns to Virginia in order to try to rescue his wife and children. After accidentally awakening his former master, Madison Washington and his wife attempt to escape, but his wife is shot and killed and Madison Washington is sold to traders. While he is about to be taken by boat to the Deep South, he runs into Listwell again and relates his tale. In the final part of the novella, a group of white men discuss a revolt aboard the *Creole* and it is revealed that Madison Washington led the revolt and gained freedom in the British Bahamas.

In his novella, Douglass uses epigraphs to construct his framework for Madison Washington's humanity. Epigraphs tend to be a minor detail within a text, however, because this essay is addressing how these writers frame racial violence, this minor detail represents a way Douglass incorporates Shakespeare to frame his text. Other abolitionist writers, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, have used Shakespeare as a framing device in their political texts. Douglass, unlike the letter writers published in the *American Museum*, uses Shakespeare in a fictional text to argue for a violent black man's heroism and humanity. Instead of a play that directly addresses issues of race or ethnicity,

Douglass invokes a revolutionary play: *Henry VI Part 2*. Douglass' framing references to Shakespeare indicate the essential way Shakespeare provides a framework for revolutionary violence to abolitionists.

The most apparent allusion to Shakespeare within Douglass' fiction appears as an epigraph taken from *Henry VI Part Two*. Before addressing this direct incorporation through one epigraph, however, I will address how Douglass uses epigraphs to frame his abolitionist project more generally. Douglass opens his novella with a religious¹⁰ epigraph:

Oh! child of grief, why weepst thou?
Why droops thy sad and mournful brow?
Why is thy look so like despair?
What deep, sad sorrow lingers there? (Douglass 3).

The epigraph comes from the hymn "God is Love"¹¹ which might be fitting for a variety of abolitionist texts, but sets up an interesting tension in Douglass'. The hymn itself addresses a grieving Christian in order to reassure them that life will be better in Heaven. But Douglass, in "The Heroic Slave," does not concern himself with the afterlife in the way Stowe does. Instead, he portrays a man who actively pursues freedom in the present world. He does present Madison Washington as a man aiming for liberty, but questions where this salvation might be found on earth. By staging the United States, and Virginia in particular, as a paradise for statesmen and then exposing the "deep, sad sorrow" that America forced all slaves including Madison Washington to endure, Douglass introduces his hero.

Douglass' epigraphs continue to act as framing devices as he turns to Shakespeare for the second epigraph of "The Heroic Slave." The transition from a religious hymn to

10 For more on Douglass' complex relationship with Christianity, see Van Deburg.

11 Hymn as identified by editor John Stauffer in his notes on page 562.

Shakespeare—while the body of Douglass’ text continues to address neither directly—may seem sudden or give readers an excuse to virtually ignore these epigraphs. However, they in fact signal Douglass’ transition towards his own original ideas and arguments about slave rebellions. Appealing to religion would have been nothing new to an abolitionist cause and even bringing in some Shakespearean texts might have been typical as seen though the trope used in Gray and the direct use of Shakespeare in abolitionist letters, but Douglass introduces a different Shakespeare into his fiction. Instead of bringing in *Othello* or *The Merchant of Venice* and interpreting the characters of Othello and Shylock as heroes, as other abolitionists had done, Douglass chose *2 Henry VI* for his allusion. Douglass’ divergence from the normal use of Shakespeare in an Antebellum text allows Douglass to take his novella, and political argument, in a new direction. Instead of interpreting Othello or Shylock as betrayed, yet dignified, “others” in Shakespeare’s narrative, Douglass uses a play that includes an Irish rebellion. In doing so, Douglass presents Madison Washington as a typical hero, not an exception. Douglass’ tragedy operates on the premise that Madison Washington deserves and is denied a place among the most revered statesmen in American history, not that he was a controversial hero like Othello or Shylock.

Rather than aligning Madison Washington with any one Shakespearean hero, Douglass uses Shakespeare to discuss the larger issue of rebellion. He chooses the beginning of a scene where there is a murder aboard a ship for his epigraph:

The gaudy, babbling and remorseful day
Is crept into the bosom of the sea;
And now loud-howling wolves arouse the jades
That Drag the tragic melancholy night;
Who with their drowsy, slow, and flagging wings
Clip dead men’s graves, and from their misty jaws

Breathe foul contagions, darkness in the air (*2 Henry VI* IV.i.1-14).¹²

Douglass' epigraph comes from the beginning of the scene in *2 Henry VI* where the principal villain of the play, William de la Poole, 4th Earl of Suffolk, is killed aboard a ship after being banished. As Douglass aims to glorify Madison Washington's revolt that killed one white man aboard the *Creole*, the appeal of this scene becomes apparent. The description Douglass quotes, voiced by one of the pirates, sets the stage for the death of Suffolk and introduces the "darkness" of the scene. Although no one connected to Henry VI is directly implicated in Suffolk's death, as pirates kill Suffolk, his death removes an obstacle for Henry. Henry's scheming wife, Queen Margaret, represents the sole mourner as she struggles with a desire to mourn her lover and to get revenge (*2 Henry VI* IV.iv.1-6). While Henry cannot ever assert his agency or be a true hero, in the moral economy of the play, the death of Suffolk is justified. In order to continue to justify Madison Washington's future violence, Douglass introduces this epigraph to frame Madison Washington's future actions. The "melancholy" night provides the setting for violence as Douglass aims to stage Madison Washington as a noble statesman who would never kill for pleasure, only for freedom.

Through alluding to a justified killing aboard a ship, Douglass uses his Shakespearean epigraph to set the stage for Madison Washington's future actions. By avoiding type casting Madison Washington as a specific Shakespearean character, Douglass is able to use Shakespeare as a cultural reference point and context for his hero without limiting Madison Washington to an allusion.¹³ He provides a noble context for his

12 For the epigraph in "The Heroic Slave," see Douglass 9.

13 If one did read Madison Washington in terms of Henry VI this would be a fitting comparison for Douglass. Douglass aims to portray Madison Washington as a denied American hero, unrecognized by the annals of history. Henry VI in Shakespeare's three plays on the king was never able to assert his power and become a strong king. In some

actions without limiting his characterization. Connecting Madison Washington to Shakespeare's tradition of history plays,¹⁴ particularly one that deals with killing aboard a ship and revolt, allows Douglass to present his fiction in a Shakespearean, British, heroic context. The Irish and British revolts against Henry in particular, allow Douglass to add another layer to his discussions of the American Revolution by connected it to a larger history. In this sense, Douglass furthers the language of the American Revolution by continuing to explore rebellion against particularly British tyranny through *2 Henry VI*.

By bringing in a Shakespeare play that deals with rebellion, Douglass both elevates Madison Washington and expands his context. Instead of a mere ship revolt or killing aboard a vessel, Douglass' account of Madison Washington becomes linked to the American Revolution as well as a greater, global struggle against oppression. While Douglass does not delve deeply into the plight of the Irish, he does go on to use part of a poem by Thomas Moore as an epigraph:¹⁵

Oh, where's the slave so lowly
Condemn'd to chains unholy,
Who could he burst
His bonds at first
Would pine beneath them slowly? (Moore "Where is the Slave").¹⁶

Moore's poem directly addresses American slavery and again serves to justify rebellion and violent revolt: the poem claims that slaves, if they could, would "burst / His bonds at

ways, interesting parallels between the characters and historical figures can be drawn, however, Douglass does not choose to capitalize upon these similarities.

14 The *Henry VI* series arguably solidified Shakespeare's renowned reputation as a playwright in his time. Shakespeare's history plays in general represent a significant part of his career even though modern audiences might be more familiar with *Othello* than the *Henry VI* series.

15 Thomas Moore, while not an explicit revolutionary, favored an independent Ireland and Catholic rebellion. He is typically considered to be the bard of Ireland, although he did write critically of slavery in the United States as the poem Douglass cites alludes to.

16 For the epigraph in "The Heroic Slave," see Douglass 41.

first” rather than remain in slavery. By arguing that any slave, given the opportunity, would do anything to escape, Moore’s poem provides justification for slave uprisings. Douglass, by using Moore, references poetry that both directly addresses the oppression in the United States and connects it to Moore’s own history of Irish rebellion. Expanding his epigraph framework from a Shakespeare play with an Irish revolt to an Irish poet allows Douglass to use allusions to Shakespeare in a way that Douglass himself controls. Instead of modeling Madison Washington’s story to fit a Shakespearean character or plotline, Douglass invokes Shakespeare to frame rather than dictate Madison Washington’s revolutionary nature.

Douglass, however, does not simply rely on epigraphs when using Shakespeare to frame “The Heroic Slave.” While the epigraphs place the story of Madison Washington within a Shakespearean, dignified context, Douglass uses the soliloquy to connect Madison Washington’s humanity to that of Shakespearean heroes. Nowadays, Hamlet may be the main Shakespearean hero associated with the soliloquy, but the majority of Shakespeare’s heroes use the soliloquy.¹⁷ It is difficult to argue for any particular Shakespearean character to be identified by Douglass’ use of the rhetorical device. Once again, Douglass manipulates his allusions to Shakespeare in order to present Madison Washington as his own hero. By using the soliloquy in particular, Douglass frames Madison Washington as an intelligent man with undeniable personhood. Through the use of oration, Douglass conveys Madison Washington’s natural intelligence. As referenced in section two of this essay, elocution lessons were essential to any freedman’s education in Antebellum America. In order to succeed in American society, free African Americans

¹⁷ Shakespeare villains also use the soliloquy, in fact, Richard delivers Shakespeare’s longest soliloquy in *3 Henry VI*. The rhetorical device itself is more strongly associated with an appeal to personality and humanity of the character delivering the speech.

had to convey a level of education through their speech. That Madison Washington delivered an impromptu soliloquy in perfect American English would have impressed his natural intelligence upon the reader.

Soliloquys also convey a level of honesty that is not guaranteed in dialogue between characters. In her discussion of Hamlet, Maher argues that soliloquys represent honest discourse between the character and the audience, making the audience like a close confidant (Maher xvi). Douglass uses this honesty to present Madison Washington as a man of integrity to Listwell, the white listener: “Tieing[sic] his [Listwell’s] horse at a short distance from the brook, he stealthily drew near the solitary speaker; and, concealing himself by the side of a huge fallen tree, he distinctly heard the following soliloquy” (Douglass 5). Through the soliloquy, Douglass uses a Shakespearean framework to present Madison Washington as an honest man, carefully describing how Listwell clearly heard the personal reflection. In presenting a violent black man as a hero, Douglass would necessarily have to demonstrate Madison Washington’s trustworthiness to a white audience that might fear the likes of Madison Washington and Nat Turner in other portrayals. To help justify his later violence, Douglass uses a soliloquy to introduce Madison Washington’s reasons for revolting in an open and trustworthy way.

The content of the soliloquy itself is reminiscent of Hamlet as Madison Washington debates the meaning of his life and possibility for liberty by saying, “What, then, is life to me? it is aimless and worthless, and worse than worthless...Can it be that I *dare* not run away? *Perish the thought*, I *dare* do any thing which may be done by another...I am no coward. *Liberty* I will have, or die in the attempt to gain it” (Douglass 5-6). In his debate over the meaning of his life and humanity, Douglass has Madison Washington draw

together the language of Shakespeare and the American Revolution. He practically quotes Patrick Henry while engaging in a Shakespearean soliloquy. In this passage, Douglass illuminates his aim in connecting Shakespeare to this rebellious black man. By framing Madison Washington as a would-be American hero and a British hero by necessity, Douglass crafts his tragedy. Madison Washington, although Douglass compares him to the founders, could never be held in the same regard on American soil. Instead, to have his freedom recognized, the hero must arrive at British port. An American hero who is only set free under the supposedly tyrannical British law represents a scathing critique of the unrealized ideals of the new American republic. Shakespeare provides the real framework for Madison Washington, not the Revolution as might be intuitively assumed. In order for Madison Washington to be properly remembered, Douglass treats his hero as a Shakespearean character, not a Founding Father. Therefore, Douglass both presents the potential of American ideals as well as their contemporaneous failure through in the context of Shakespeare's histories and heroes.

V. Conclusion and Further Research

In both *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and "The Heroic Slave," writers employ Shakespeare to frame black masculinity and black violence as either criminal or revolutionary. In his attempts to criminalize Nat, Gray framed Nat's confessions in a way that invokes how Othello was framed by white characters in the play. Douglass' more explicit approach allowed him to portray Madison Washington as a neglected revolutionary hero. Whether Shakespeare allowed for an insurgent or revolutionary perspective entirely depended on the staging of the text. For example, allusions to *Othello* could provide dignity or allow a racist writer to present black violence as

criminal. However, when done by free African Americans, the act of using Shakespeare can be rebellious. By demonstrating a mastery of one of the most important writers in the English language, these writers appropriate and claim access to a cultural legacy of English literature that was denied to slaves. Thus, when black abolitionists such as Douglass use Shakespeare, their allusion makes themselves and their texts revolutionary. Although Douglass claims that Madison Washington belongs in the annals of Virginia's revolutionary heroes, the use of Shakespeare as a cultural reference point when framing black violence exposes reliance upon the traditions of the supposedly tyrannical nation the United States revolted against. Douglass wrote "The Heroic Slave" while completely aware of this underlying irony, that his hero could only be free under the dominion of England.

Even when writers like Douglass and the author of the "Othello" letter argued for the principles of the American Revolution, British literature and transatlantic identity continued to impact political discourse. The United States, divided and on the brink of war, could rely upon tropes from recognizable British literature in order to parse the tension for both abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates. At a moment when what it means to be American was questioned, American writers like Gray and Douglass turned to Shakespeare and the British roots of the English language in order to structure their respective arguments. In doing so, these texts illuminate how transatlantic identity still permeated American thought. Perhaps in a divided young nation, political writers felt the need to approach abolition from an older, stable shared context.

Abolitionist writers also implicitly critique how the United States, a nation that gained independence from England, could be behind their tyrannical mother country in

terms of liberty for all its peoples. Douglass' maligned American hero could only find freedom at a British port, not in the land that supposedly values liberty. Reliance upon British literature featured as a prominent aspect of political fiction and rhetoric that attempted to present black violence to white audiences.

Other writers outside of the scope of this paper also approached the irony of black freedom in Britain and slavery in the supposedly free America through references to British literature. The use of British literature as cultural reference points could be an area of future research in texts pertaining to black women in America as well. Although this paper deals exclusively with male writers and black masculinity, the use of British literature by women in this period could provide another look at gender more broadly in Antebellum literature, particularly by black women writers. In particular, Hannah Crafts' recently discovered manuscript, *The Bondswoman's Narrative* (1853-1861), discusses issues of legacy and continuously references British literature. As scholars continue to study texts like Hannah Crafts' *The Bondswoman's Narrative* more could be learned about African American identity in literature. Crafts' unpublished manuscript also relies upon on allusions to British literature and implicitly highlights the difference in liberty afforded to black people in England and America. *The Bondswoman's Narrative* has already garnered some scholarly attention for Crafts' use of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853), but Crafts' allusions to *Macbeth* could be a way to put her novel in conversation with Douglass and abolitionist writings like the *American Museum* letters. Reading Crafts with attention to the role of the British canon could allow for further analysis of how black writers critiqued American slavery through their use of British literature.

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