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The Antislavery Poems of John Marjoribanks

HAIL! rising Genius of fair Scotia's Isle!
On thee the Muses only deign to smile!

The extravagant eulogy to which these lines belong appeared in the *Jamaica Gazette* in the 1780s. It was addressed not to Robert Burns (as the unwary might guess) but to his almost unknown contemporary and countryman, John Marjoribanks (pronounced Marchbanks). The rising genius was at that time serving in Jamaica as an officer in an infantry regiment, but he was already the author of a two-volume collection of poems, published in Kelso under the title *Trifles in Verse. By a Young Soldier* (1784). The tribute to him celebrated the publication of a second edition of this work, in three volumes, a year later.¹ The additional volume consisted mainly of poems written in Jamaica, with notes identifying several of these as having been published in the *Jamaica Gazette* also. They reflect various aspects of social life in the colony but are conspicuously silent on the subject of slavery; it was thus certainly not as an abolitionist poet that Marjoribanks won his accolade in the Jamaican press. The anonymous author went on to predict that the poet's writings would earn him lasting fame ("succeeding ages shall revere thy youth"), ensuring that even after death "thy works in earth's loud ear [shall] rebound, / And you, tho' dead, shall ever live renown'd!" The prophecy was wildly over-optimistic: Marjoribanks and his poems sank almost without

trace after his death in 1796, and none of them has so far been reprinted in full. He is known today (where known at all) as author of a ferocious antislavery work, *Slavery; An Essay in Verse*,² which would assuredly have outraged his Jamaican admirers if they ever saw it.

Published in Edinburgh in 1792, while Wilberforce's bill for abolition of the slave trade was being debated in the House of Commons, *Slavery; An Essay in Verse* joined the flood of poems, books and pamphlets on slavery which had been published since the start of the organised campaign for abolition of the slave trade in 1787. It made relatively little impression on British readers at the time and was forgotten afterwards for two centuries, until abridged versions appeared in two anthologies of poems relating to slavery: *Amazing Grace* (2002), compiled by James Basker, and Marcus Wood's *The Poetry of Slavery* (2003).³ But *Slavery; An Essay in Verse* was neither the first nor the last of Marjoribanks's interventions in the fierce and long-running debate about slavery and the slave trade. This paper will show how vigorously and consistently he protested against slavery throughout his writing career and will argue that in certain ways he was untypical as an abolitionist poet.

In addition to the works already mentioned, Marjoribanks published two further volumes of poetry: *Pieces of Rhyme* (Edinburgh, 1793), and *A Poetical Address to Rational and Genuine Liberty* (Edinburgh, 1792), an ambitious but unremarkable exercise in Whiggish political philosophy. In spite of its title and date, it makes no mention of African slavery or the slave trade. After his death an anonymous friend collected his later poems and published them under the title, *Trifles in Verse: Volume Fourth. Being the Posthumous Poems of Captain John Marjoribanks, of a late Independent Company* (Edinburgh, 1798).

Marjoribanks was born in Kelso, in the Scottish borders, in 1759,⁴ son of a regular officer in the British army. His father, John Marjoribanks of Crumrigg, fought in America

during the War of Independence, and died in 1781 of wounds sustained while making an honorable stand at the battle of Eutaw Springs.⁵ John Marjoribanks the younger was educated at Kelso Grammar School, and afterwards spent five or six years in Edinburgh, during which he appears to have matriculated at the university⁶ but without graduating. His father's estate, which he inherited in 1781, was heavily burdened with debt and had to be sold. In 1782 Marjoribanks secured a commission in the army and was sent to Jamaica in 1783 to join his regiment, the 19th Foot, which had its headquarters at Stoneyhill Barracks on the outskirts of Kingston. He remained in Jamaica for nearly four years, seeing no military action but taking an active part in the social and literary life of Kingston, and joining all too heartily in the regimental recreations of heavy drinking and sexual adventures.⁷ By his account, these excesses caused the ruin of his health as well as that of many of his fellow officers.⁸ He became a highly critical observer of the Jamaican plantocracy, although his attacks on planters and slave-masters do not appear in any of the writings he published while serving in Jamaica (publication of such views in the colony itself would have been politically unthinkable). Towards the end of 1787 he returned to Scotland, and appears to have remained in Edinburgh or its environs for the last few years of his life. From 1791 onwards he was living in straitened circumstances as a half-pay captain, latterly in poor health, until his death in November 1796 after a long illness.

Biographical facts on their own do not explain Marjoribanks's lasting opposition to slavery. The farmers and lesser gentry of the Scottish lowlands were not as a class conspicuous for their liberal opinions, and were far more likely to send their sons to the West Indies as "slave drivers" (the common term for book-keepers, the lowest rank in the white plantation hierarchy)⁹ than to challenge the slave system. Marjoribanks himself had no prior links with any of the liberal, radical or evangelical groups in Britain which were active in antislavery protest in his lifetime, and his early antislavery writings predate the

founding of the public campaign against the slave trade. On the other hand, it is well known that the intellectual climate in eighteenth-century Scotland favoured the development of antislavery opinion among the educated classes. If, as seems probable, Marjoribanks was a student at Edinburgh University in the late 1770s, he would certainly have been exposed to antislavery doctrines. He might have heard them voiced by William Robertson, then Principal of the university; he undoubtedly would have heard them from Dugald Stewart. The appearance of the name “Dugald Stewart,” described as “Professor of Moral Philosophy, Edinburgh,” in the list of subscribers to Marjoribanks’s volume, *Pieces of Rhyme* (1793), suggests that the poet was indeed his former student. In 1778-9 Stewart gave a course of lectures on philosophy which included an analysis of slavery, ending with the sarcastic question, “Is it lawful that we should reduce such numbers of our fellow creatures to a state infinitely worse than that of the brutes because we must have sugar and tobacco?”¹⁰ Moreover, slavery became a live issue in Edinburgh at this period through the case of Joseph Knight, a slave who had been brought to Scotland from Jamaica by his master, John Wedderburn. Knight’s struggles to gain his freedom, through a series of actions in Scottish law courts from 1773 to 1778, turned on the landmark judgment that “the State of Slavery is not recognised by the Laws of this Kingdom and is inconsistent with the principles thereof.”¹¹

It is hardly surprising therefore to find Marjoribanks, at just this time and long before he set foot in Jamaica, writing about slavery (at a distance) from an “enlightened” viewpoint. The following lines appear in his poem, “The Sweets of Sleep” (probably dating from 1778/79):¹²

The Slave in slumbers feels no more his chains,
 Forgets his sorrows, and escapes his pains;
 Again transported to his native shore,
 He’s bless’d with freedom as he was before;
 To distant wilds the happy Savage hies,
 Where AFRIC’s children shun EUROPEAN eyes;

Where, safe from tyrants, he may widely stray,
And pale-fac'd CHRISTIANS ne'er can find the way.

Literary influence is more apparent here than topical reference: the facile image of enslavement as a state of generalised “sorrows” and “pains,” contrasted with the slave’s dream of pastoral freedom in his native land, owes as much to earlier eighteenth-century poetic imaginings as to Scottish moral philosophy or legal argument. Pope’s “Indian” slave, in a much-quoted passage from *An Essay on Man*, dreams similarly of:

Some safer world in depth of woods embrac'd,
Some happier island in the wat'ry waste,
Where slaves once more their native land behold,
No fiends torment, no Christians thirst for gold.¹³

The surprise, then, is not that a young Scot imbued with the principles of Augustan humanism and Enlightenment philosophy should deplore slavery in the abstract: it is that his airy principles should survive exposure to the social life and ethos of slave-owning planters and merchants in a British colony. It is now widely recognised that on the issue of slavery there was a yawning gap between principles and practice among Scots of Marjoribanks’s class in the later eighteenth century and after. The phenomenon has been forcefully described by Duncan Rice:

The ethics and expediency of slavery were canvassed repeatedly in the network of convivial and debating clubs which the major Scottish cities supported from the fifties [i.e. 1750s] onwards. The treatises of Hume and Robert Wallace, for instance, had originally been papers read in such groups.... Their writings on moral philosophy, too, were in most cases the published version of lectures which had been faithfully taken down by generation after generation of Scottish students, complete with their critical content on slavery, and subsequently presented in the grammar schools. Well before the American Revolution, there must have been few Scots educated above the level of basic literacy who were not familiar with the enlightened indictment of slavery.

And yet, Rice continues, this “ferment of criticism” had “no material effect:” not only were Scotland’s institutional connections with colonial slavery untouched by it, but philosophical objections appear to have had no influence on the behaviour of Scottish

emigrants, “even highly literate ones, however much their mentors had demonstrated that slavery was at odds with natural law.”¹⁴

Indeed, there is a good deal of anecdotal evidence to show that those Scots who went out to the West Indies with humanitarian scruples about the slave system rapidly became hardened to the customs of the country. The desensitizing effect of daily exposure to the brutalities of the slave system is described by one of these, Zachary Macaulay. Son of the kirk minister of Inveraray, he grew up in Scotland and later became one of the most vigorous and effective campaigners against the slave trade and slavery itself; but in 1785, at the age of sixteen, he went out to Jamaica to work as bookkeeper on a sugar plantation. He remained there for four years (at the very time when Marjoribanks was in Jamaica, though there is no evidence that they ever met) and afterwards recorded a brief account of his experiences. His job as bookkeeper was “laborious, irksome, and degrading in a degree of which I could have no previous conception,” but he was even more strongly affected at first by the fact that “by my situation I was exposed not only to the sight, but also to the practice of severities over others, the very recollection of which makes my blood run cold.” Although “at first feelingly alive to the miseries of the poor slaves,” he persuaded himself that the only way to retain the respect of his white colleagues and do his job effectively was deliberately to inure himself to the slaves’ sufferings. Macaulay quotes a letter of his own, written at the time, in which he cheerfully notes how successfully his qualms had been suppressed:

The air of this Island has some peculiar quality in it, for no sooner does a person set foot on it than his former ways are entirely changed. The contagion of an universal example must indeed have its effect. You would hardly know your friend . . . were you to view me in a field of canes, amidst perhaps a hundred of the sable race, cursing and bawling, while the noise of the whip resounding on their shoulders, and the cries of the poor wretches, would make you imagine some unlucky accident had carried you to the doleful shades.

In short, adds Macaulay, he had become “callous and indifferent” to “the miseries of the Negroes.”¹⁵

How Robert Burns might have reacted to the experience of plantation slavery if he had gone to Jamaica in 1786, as he planned, is a matter of recent conjecture.¹⁶ But the effect on Marjoribanks of his own observation of slave life is clear: it turned him from highminded abhorrence of slavery in the abstract to passionate denunciation of the slave system as he encountered it in actuality. His earliest poem based on experience dates from 1785, during his second year in the colony, and he did not cease to write against slavery until he was silenced by terminal illness.

Slavery; An Essay in Verse, is “humbly inscribed” on the titlepage “to Planters, Merchants, and others concerned in the Management or Sale of Negro Slaves;” as Basker remarks, “Marjoribanks was obviously aware that he was engaged in a battle of competing discourses for control of public opinion and government policy.”¹⁷ Publication of the work in 1792 was clearly timed to support the passage of Wilberforce’s abolition bill through parliament, but it was not originally written for that purpose. In a prefatory “Letter, sent with the following essay, from the Author to Mr. Haliburton, Secretary of the Edinburgh Society for Promoting the Abolition of the African Slave Trade,”¹⁸ Marjoribanks insisted that although his own account of slavery corresponded closely with the Society’s published “Abstract” of evidence on the subject, his poem was not just “a versification” of that document.¹⁹ He explains that it was “written in Jamaica, in October 1786,” before the Society was formed, adding, “I have not now made the addition of a single couplet to my original manuscript.” This apologia is not simply a defence of the poem’s literary originality; more importantly, it asserts its value as independent evidence of the evils of the slave system. In answer to

the contingent question, “why has this Essay been so long concealed; or to what purpose is it now produced?” Marjoribanks says:

I can only answer, That my opinion of the Slave-Trade, and my compassion for the sufferings of the Negroes in the West-Indies, of which I was for several years an eye witness, have been long and invariably the same; which in private conversation, even in Jamaica, I have ever avowed. Indispensible avocations, however, put it out of my power at the proper period, and in a regular way, to step forward as a voluntary witness in the cause of truth. Nor, while I saw with exultation the brightest talents, and most distinguished characters in the kingdom, ranged on the side of justice and humanity; did I presume to think of obtruding upon the public, in any other mode, the sentiments of so obscure an individual as myself.

In other words, his “avocation” as an officer in the British army made it impossible to speak out in public against the practices prevailing in Jamaica while serving in the colony itself. The profession that (after his return to Britain in 1787) he thought himself too “obscure” to attempt publication was probably realistic rather than self-effacing.

Nevertheless, according to his own account, he gained the confidence to “step forward” at last in 1792 because he felt he had something new to offer to the abolitionist cause. On reading the *Abstract* of statements presented to parliament and comparing it with “the great mass of evidence that had fallen under my own knowledge,” he was moved to “contribute my humble mite towards the raising of this mighty structure” (i.e. the abolition campaign), in the belief that the “facts and observations” he could offer would “illustrate or corroborate some part of the evidence” already amassed. Conscious, however, that verse was not the normal medium for public evidence, he explains further that “the only memorandum” he had kept in Jamaica of “incidents or reflections arising from them” took the form of a commonplace book containing “a number of little poetical pieces Slavery was naturally the subject of several of them.” He nevertheless conceived that

these artless effusions, meant only at the time to give vent to the painful feelings of my heart, excited by the distressful scenes which surrounded me; written at the moment that the impression was fresh upon my mind, would not only have more weight than any thing I could now compose upon the subject; but might perhaps even carry with them stronger conviction than evidence drawn forth on distant recollection, through the force of interrogation.

Slavery; An Essay in Verse contains two of Marjoribanks's so-called "effusions:" the title-poem itself, and "Stanzas on the Execution of a Negro, at Spanish-town, Jamaica, August 1785." Neither of them is indeed "artless," and the "Essay," at 438 lines in heroic couplets, is far from "little."

Marjoribanks's root-and-branch assault on plantation slavery in the "Essay" is distinguished more by its savage moral indignation than by its quality as argument. Both Basker and Wood remark on the powerful impact of its descriptions of the cruel treatment of the enslaved. Even by the standards of the day, Basker writes, "the poem is remarkable for the shock value of the imagery: a foetus sold prenatally into slavery, limbs casually lopped off, a pretty slave girl slowly poisoned to death."²⁰ These are only three of numerous specific examples described in the text or in the copious footnotes. As Wood comments, it is "the precision of the testimony, and the ghastly nature of the details recorded which give this poem a unique place within the poetry generated by abolition."²¹ It makes its point however through satire rather than invective. Its ferociousness is kept from degenerating into hysteria by the partial restraint of irony; the poisoning of the enslaved girl (described as the work of "a jealous mistress"), for example, prompts a sardonic comment on the special ingenuity of female slave-owners in devising cruelties: "It must be own'd you all do wond'rous well, / Yet still in *torturing* the fair excel."²²

Two features of the poem make it distinctive for its time. Like many other abolitionists Marjoribanks seeks to rebut the notion that Africans are inferior to Europeans in mental, moral or emotional development; but *unlike* most abolitionists writing in Britain he grounds his argument not on religious or humanist principles nor on such ethnographic sources as were then available, but on conversation and face-to-face inquiry. His footnotes repeatedly refer to "Guinea negroes" or "African slaves" whom he has "conversed with" or questioned. It cannot be claimed that the poem shows profound insight into the minds and

feelings of enslaved Africans as a result of these personal interrogations, but they do indicate a respect—unusual for people of Marjoribanks’s background—for Africans as fellow-beings, with minds and opinions of their own. The second feature is the tactic of turning antislavery polemic back on to the author himself, by putting a riposte in his enemy’s mouth:

Here the rough planter looks profoundly wise;
 “A pretty fellow this, indeed!” he cries.
 What would *your* conduct be, I’d gladly know,
Should Chance on you some hundred slaves bestow!
 Pray would you set the worthless rascals *free?*
 Or would you keep them—*just the same as we?*”

(A footnote says: “I have frequently had these, and the like *knock me down* arguments dashed into my teeth”). The poet responds, with cheerful candour but moral certitude, that he cannot say how he himself would act under such “temptation;” as “an erring man” he too might be corrupted by avarice. “But, be *my* conduct whatsoe’er it might, / That ne’er could alter either Wrong or Right.”²³

Slavery; An Essay in Verse did not go entirely unnoticed by the reading public. It provoked a choleric retort from the Rev. Henry Holder, of Bristol and Barbados, in a pamphlet published within weeks of Marjoribanks’s attack, under the title, *Fragments of a Poem, intended to have been written in consequence of reading Major [sic] Marjoribanks’s Slavery*.²⁴ Addressing himself, like Marjoribanks, to “the West-Indian Merchants and Planters,” Holder vows to vindicate them from “the *infamous* attacks which have been made, and are now making, against the West-Indians, by the misguided and the licentious of this country.” More than half the work is taken up with a prose defence of West Indian slave-owners, while the poem itself vehemently condemns the motives and ideas of antislavery writers and campaigners in general, without specifically engaging with Marjoribanks’s text.

Marjoribanks adopted an unusual strategy in the poem which accompanied his
 “Essay” (text given in full):

Stanzas on the Execution of a Negro, at Spanish-town, Jamaica, August 1785

When Brutus struck the fatal steel
 Through the Imperial Caesar’s breast,
 The glorious deed, the patriot’s zeal,
 Stood thro’ the subject world confess’d.
 Nor yet has time destroy’d the name,
 Impartial ages love to praise;
 In story brightly shines his fame,
 Immortal as the poet’s lays.
 Yet Brutus stabb’d a gen’rous heart,
 In whose affections fast he grew;
 To whom he ow’d a filial part,
 It was a parent Brutus slew.
He never felt the galling chain,
 The lash that lacerates the slave;
 But favours (all conferr’d in vain)
 Were the sole fetters Caesar gave!

But see! poor Azubal in torments dies!
 At which my soul in agonies recoils!
 See how he writhes! Ah hear his horrid cries!
 Whilst with slow cruelty the furnace broils!
 Say, what was Azubal’s atrocious crime,
 Compar’d to Brutus’ celebrated deed?
 (Candour regards no colour and no clime;
 And Freedom smiles as oft as tyrants bleed!)

No friendly bosom did he wound;
 No acts of kindness had he known;
 Compell’d to till a foreign ground,
 For ever exil’d from his own!
 Still agonising mem’ry drew
 The sweets that bless’d his Afric shore;
 The days of slumb’ring ease he knew;
 The friends he must behold no more!
 Indignant still recalls the day
 European ruffians first drew near;
 When, vainly struggling, forc’d away
 From all that ever could be dear!
 Beneath reluctant labour faint,
 Say what reward awaits his pains?
 The whip’s the solace of his plaint;
 And rest is granted but in chains!
 Ideal loss of Liberty inspir’d

The haughty Roman to destroy his friend;
 But keener injuries the Negro fir'd
 To end a tyrant, and to kill a fiend.
 Brutus still seems a parricide to me,
 And Reason gives reluctantly applause;
 But to poor Azubal my praise is free,
 Who boldly perish'd in a juster cause.²⁵

Footnotes explain that the poem was “actually written a few days after the execution” of the slave, and that although the name “Azubal” was fictitious, the “circumstances” were true. The man had run away from the estate to which he belonged, but he later met one of the bookkeepers who tried to seize him, and “a struggle ensued, in which the white man was killed.” The slave was caught and “*roasted to death at a slow fire on the race-course near Spanish-town, for the crime before mentioned.*”

In subject-matter, Marjoribanks’s “Stanzas” recall a better-known piece by Bryan Edwards, written long before Edwards became prominent as an anti-abolitionist. Originally published in the *Universal Magazine* (November, 1777) as “The Negro’s Dying Speech on his being executed for Rebellion in the Island of Jamaica,”²⁶ it was reprinted by coincidence in the same year as Marjoribanks’s poem, and under a similar title: “Stanzas, Occasioned by the Death of Alico, An African Slave, Condemned for Rebellion, in Jamaica, 1760.”²⁷ Marjoribanks may have read Edwards’s poem in its earlier form, but whether he did or not, his own “Stanzas” adopt a very different rhetorical approach. Where Edwards appropriates the voice of the enslaved “Negro” for emotive effect (a device which was to become immensely popular in subsequent poetry of slavery), Marjoribanks resorts to structural irony. The unpremeditated killing of a slave-driver by a slave is contrasted with the slaying of Caesar by Brutus. The common ground is that both acts were committed against “tyrants” for the sake of “Freedom:” but while Brutus, who assassinated someone to whom he was indebted for generous favours and fatherly affection, is universally

honoured as a hero, the slave, who owed nothing to his masters except forced exile, chains, hard labour, and the whip, suffers an agonising and ignominious death.

The author's sympathy with the slave is obvious in the poem, but it is underlined by further comment in the footnote already quoted, describing the slave's crime and punishment; the note continues, with Swiftian obliquity:

Of the many strong arguments which have been urged in favour of the abolition of the Slave-Trade, one of the most obvious and incontrovertible, is surely this: That the constant importation of savage and untamed spirits into the islands, not only subjects the white inhabitants to frequent alarm, danger, and sometimes death itself (to which they are seldom or never exposed from the Creole Negroes); but also affords the plea of necessity to punishments the most shocking to humanity, and highly disgraceful to the colonies of a civilized nation.²⁸

Marjoribanks was not always successful in controlling his raw indignation, however. A month later, in "On the Destructive Hurricane, which happened on the 27th August 1785" (the poem is dated 22 September 1785), he addressed the issue of slavery again, but without irony this time.

Hurricanes were a favourite topic in verse descriptions of the West Indies, giving the author scope for demonstrating command of the rhetorical "sublime." James Grainger, for example, devotes ninety lines to the phenomenon in *The Sugar Cane* (1764).²⁹

Marjoribanks, however, is one of the first to represent the hurricane as an instrument of moral or divine retribution for the evils of slavery. It was so used by William Cowper in his famous abolitionist song, "The Negro's Complaint."³⁰ But where Cowper avoids personal (and unChristian) vindictiveness by using an imagined "Negro" for his mouthpiece, Marjoribanks speaks in his own voice. His poem begins:

Ye burden'd slaves, ye sons of Afric, smile!
See vengeance bursting on this blood-bath'd isle!
Let every element in fury rise,
And blend together earth, sea, air, and skies;—

Enslaved Africans, however, have little to fear from the hurricane since they “cannot find a fate that’s more severe” than their existing condition. “But,” the poem continues, “see the tyrant, trembling as he lies; / Dread in his heart, and horror in his eyes!” Marjoribanks dwells pitilessly, even gloatingly, on the sufferings of the plantation-owners as a result of the storm, welcoming the devastation of their property and the deaths and injuries of their children, as punishment for the miseries which they have inflicted on the slaves: “Go weep, unpitied!—’tis at last thy turn!” The piece ends, with unbridled vengefulness:

I can contemplate, with a gen’rous joy,
 Torrents lay waste, and hurricanes destroy;
 And see that vengeance in the winds of Heaven,
 The NEGRO’s dagger had less amply given!³¹

The viciousness of “On the Destructive Hurricane” deprives it of ethical authority, turning it from a vehicle of moral outrage, driven by Swiftian *saeva indignatio*, into mere rant. Marjoribanks himself evidently had misgivings about the piece (though not enough to suppress it), for he adds a footnote at the end claiming that he could not “be accused of exulting over a calamity from which I was myself exempt” since he had a “share of the personal dangers and distresses” of the storm when the barracks where he was quartered were destroyed. The note goes on to absolve *some* planters from his general condemnation:

The degree of *point* necessary to be preserved in poetical composition, often prevents proper discriminations being made. I therefore request that, whenever I speak in severe terms of any body of men I may be understood with numerous exceptions. I certainly know very worthy individuals among the planters of Jamaica. I take this occasion of acknowledging, with gratitude, and with pleasure, that in this island I have personally met with some acts of kindness, and many of civility.³²

Marjoribanks makes no attempt however to palliate his vindictive pleasure at the sufferings of *unworthy* planters and their families. “On the Destructive Hurricane” is a rare example in his antislavery writings of a complete breakdown of the urbanity which, as a follower of Augustan literary tradition, he would have regarded as requisite for poetic decorum.

He regained his poise in another long poem, “The Deliverance of Africa,”³³ which is concerned specifically with the slave trade. Dated April 1792, it enthusiastically anticipates the success of Wilberforce’s abolition bill. The poem bears clear signs of the influence of Scottish Enlightenment doctrine. It begins by rhetorically questioning the motives which had led Britons to explore Africa:

Was it Humanity, or Virtue’s cause;
 To give them Morals, Liberty, or Laws?
 Ah no! alas! with far less gen’rous aim
 Degen’rate Britons to these regions came!

They came, of course, to pursue the slave-trade, with all its horrors, duly catalogued by the poet. But thanks to the endeavours of the “great, the wise, the gen’rous, and the good,” these “men of blood” will cease to prevail, the iniquitous traffic will end, and a new epoch will begin in Africa. Peace, prosperity, and enlightenment will spread throughout the land; in time to come, Africans will have *African* historians (“Afric’s’ Humes and Robertsons”) to “relate / The tragic story of their Fathers’ fate,” and a “sable Milton’s patriotic lays” to admire. Marjoribanks typifies Enlightenment thinking in envisaging colonial progress in terms of the wholesale conversion of indigenous peoples to European culture. Nevertheless, his view of Africans as equals in intellectual capacity, if not yet in intellectual development, defied mainstream contemporary theory; he firmly condemns the “impious doctrines” of those who claimed that “the Negro” was formed of “inferior clay” (apparently unaware that David Hume, whom he cites as a model for future African historians, was one of them). The poem ends with an even more expansive vision of futurity, in which Africa will be a realm of “social Harmony,” “civil Polity,” learning, liberty, and plenty, until finally:

Wide shall BENEVOLENCE encircle ALL;
 And MEN their BROTHERS ALL MANKIND shall call!

But his euphoria was quickly dashed: a footnote added in 1793 sadly records the defeat of Wilberforce's bill.

Even illness and disappointment, however, failed to quench his antislavery ardour. Within a year of his death he wrote a spirited verse satire in the manner of Pope, defiantly replying to a friend who blamed him for attacking the planters and slave-traders.³⁴

According to a footnote, "This gentleman had found fault with the stanzas on the execution of a negro, and other verses inimical to slavery and the slave-trade, published in my 4th printed volume, entitled, *Pieces of Rhyme*." Like Pope, Marjoribanks revels in the satirist's role as scourge of iniquity:

Sacred the lay, tho' tun'd with little art,
That smites with anguish the oppressor's heart!
Ah! may I hope that any song of mine,
Has e'er completely answer'd this design?
Has it e'er made a tyrant planter sore?
Ah! could I make him ache at ev'ry pore!
Had ev'ry verse for him a scorpion's sting,
I'd be the bard who ne'er should cease to sing! ...
Is there a dealer in the Guinea-trade
Confin'd in bedlam thro' my muse's aid?
Is there a planter, deck'd with crown of straw,
In whose thick skull my rhimes have made a flaw!
Tell me there is!—and I'll no more complain
That I have measur'd verse so long in vain!...

In a sequel however, "To Myself, on the preceding lines,"³⁵ Marjoribanks reflects despondently:

Alas! I vainly vent my idle rage;
What planter e'er shall read my angry page?
What negro-dealer in my way shall fall;
Or cares a curse what naughty names I call?...

The lines immediately following these show that Marjoribanks had attentively read press reports of the 1792 campaign; they allude to a horrifying atrocity related by Wilberforce in one of his speeches in Parliament:

Against these cruelties I vainly preach;
No Captain KIMBER comes within my reach!

And, though he did, he'd thank his gentle jury,
He need not give one farthing for my fury.

A footnote identifies Kimber as “the master of a slave-ship, who was tried for the murder of one or more negroes; but had the *good fortune* to be acquitted.” Marjoribanks’s memory was not quite accurate; Captain Kimber was accused in fact of savagely abusing and killing a girl of fifteen, in front of the entire crew. He was tried for her murder in June 1792, but acquitted on evidence which sufficed to convince an English jury of Kimber’s “good character.”³⁶

Finally, one apparent stain on Marjoribanks’s commitment to the antislavery cause has to be considered. At the end of “Slavery; An Essay in Verse” there is a footnote in which he appears to retreat from outright opposition to slavery itself, as distinct from opposition to the slave trade. He writes:

If the reader imagine I here recommend the romantic, and as yet impracticable, scheme of emancipating the Negroes in the West-Indies; he greatly misunderstands me. My wishes (however obscurely they may be expressed,) though when first formed, not encouraged by the slightest or most distant hopes of gratification; did then, as now, perfectly coincide with what I conceive to be the laudable views of the societies since instituted, for the abolition of the trade to Africa for slaves; the meliorating the condition of those already in the islands; and, perhaps, in time, the gradual establishment of their freedom.³⁷

Marjoribanks’s disclaimer, I believe, was disingenuous: his writings elsewhere consistently proclaim that he found the whole slave system intolerable. But it was agreed by abolitionists in 1787 that success in the long-term campaign against slavery required separation of the *slave-trade* from the general issue of *slavery* itself, and that it was politic to concentrate in the first instance on opposition to the trade.³⁸ It seems more than likely therefore that when Marjoribanks proposed to dedicate the poem to the Secretary of the Edinburgh abolition society, Haliburton persuaded him to insert this cautionary note, possibly even as the price for giving his support to publication of the work.

¹ “To Ensign Marjoribanks,” *Trifles in Verse: Volume Fourth. Being the Posthumous Poems of Captain John Marjoribanks, of a late Independent Company* (Edinburgh, 1798), 154. An editorial note says the poem “appeared in the JAMAICA GAZETTE, soon after the Publication of the Three First Volumes of TRIFLES IN VERSE” [1785].

² *Slavery; An Essay in Verse. By Captain Marjoribanks, of a late Independent Company: Formerly Lieutenant in His Majesty’s 19th Regiment of Foot. Humbly inscribed to Planters, Merchants, And others concerned in the Management or Sale of Negro Slaves.* Edinburgh: J. Robertson, 1792. The full text of Marjoribanks’s “Slavery” will be available in print again in the author’s *Contrary Voices: Representations of West Indian Slavery* (University of the West Indies Press: forthcoming, 2008).

³ James G. Basker, ed., *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems about Slavery, 1660-1810* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 319-23; Marcus Wood, ed., *The Poetry of Slavery: An Anglo-American Anthology 1764-1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 195-204.

⁴ The biographical facts, insofar as I have been able to ascertain them, appear in the entry for “Marjoribanks, John,” in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn., Oxford University Press, Oct. 2006. Parish records being defective, his date of birth has to be inferred from an obituary notice in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1796), p. 969, which says he died on 7 November 1796 “in his 38th year.” I suspect, however, that this is incorrect and that he was about two years younger: see note 6 below. Valuable earlier sources are E. M. Mein, “The Horace and a Goddess of Scott’s Youth,” *History of the Berwickshire Naturalists’ Club* 37, Pt. 2 (1965), 124-8; and Roger Marjoribanks, “Marjoribanks in Eccles,” *The Marjoribanks Journal* 2 (December 1993), 15-25. I am most grateful to Major J. R. Chapman, Curator of the Green Howards Museum, Richmond, Yorkshire, for information about Marjoribanks’s army career. Marjoribanks’s works themselves remain an important but often unverifiable source of biographical evidence.

⁵ J. W. Fortescue, *A History of the British Army*, 3 vols. (London, 1902), 3.384-6; R. Marjoribanks, *Marjoribanks Journal*, 2:24-5.

⁶ *Matriculation Roll of the University of Edinburgh*, Vol. II 1775-1810, lists ‘Joannes Marjoribank’ as a pupil of Dr. John Hill, Professor of Humanities, under the year 1777. If he was born in 1759 he would then have been eighteen, an unusually late age for matriculation by eighteenth-century standards.

⁷ See “Self-Examination” (*Trifles in Verse*, 1785, 3.105-7) and “A Prayer” (*Trifles in Verse*, 1785, 3.141-3).

⁸ See “On Perusing a Copy of my Original Proposals for Publishing Trifles” (*Trifles in Verse*, 1798, 49-50) and “On my Quondam Brother-Officers of the 19th Regiment” (*Trifles in Verse*, 1798, 57ff).

⁹ The primary meaning, of course, is that given by Richard Allsopp in his *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): “The Black foreman of a work-group of slaves, himself a slave, who supervised the group with a bull-whip.”

¹⁰ Stewart’s lectures for 1778-9 survive in the form of notes made by a student: see Gordon Macintyre, *Dugald Stewart: The Pride and Ornament of Scotland* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2003), 32-3.

¹¹ Transcript of document on www.scotland.gov.uk/News/News-Extras/159 (accessed 27/02/07); John W. Cairns, “Knight, Joseph,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn., Oxford University Press, May 2006. The story is told in detail in James Robertson’s documentary novel, *Joseph Knight* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003).

¹² *Trifles in Verse*, 1784, 1.2-10. Poems at the beginning of this volume appear to be printed in chronological order; this one is undated but comes in between poems dated 1778 and 1780.

¹² *An Essay on Man*, Epistle I: 105-8.

¹⁴ C. Duncan Rice, "Controversies over Slavery in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Scotland," in Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman, eds., *Antislavery Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Abolitionists* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 24-48, 29-30. For detailed information about Scots in Jamaica in this period see Allan Karras, *Sojourners in the Sun: Scottish Migrants to Jamaica and the Chesapeake, 1740-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

¹⁵ Macaulay's memoir of his early years is included by Charles Booth in *Zachary Macaulay: his part in the movement for the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery* (London: Longmans, Green, 1934), 9-11.

¹⁶ See Andrew O. Lindsay, *Illustrious Exile: A Novel* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2006). Lindsay invents an alternative biography for Burns in which the poet does indeed emigrate in 1786, works on plantations in Jamaica and Guyana as a bookkeeper, becomes a forthright abolitionist, and dies in Guyana.

¹⁷ *Amazing Grace*, 319.

¹⁸ *Slavery*, 1792, 3-6. Campbell Haliburton was a stalwart promoter of the abolitionist cause in Edinburgh: see Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756-1838* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 88.

¹⁹ Referring to *Abstract of the evidence delivered before a select committee of the House of Commons, in the years 1790 and 1791; on the part of the petitioners for the abolition of the slave trade* (Edinburgh, 1791). It was published jointly by the Edinburgh and Glasgow abolition societies.

²⁰ *Amazing Grace*, 319.

²¹ *Poetry of Slavery*, 195.

²² *Slavery*, 1792, 17.

²³ *Slavery*, 1792, 25-6. The passages referred to in this paragraph come in the final 125 lines of the poem, which are omitted by both Basker and Wood.

²⁴ *Fragments of a Poem* (Bath, 1792), Dedication, p.5, and Introduction, p.7. Holder evidently confuses the poet with his father, Major John Marjoribanks. Copies of Holder's pamphlet survive in the Bodleian Library and British Library. An extract appears in *Amazing Grace*, 465-6, and the whole poem is accessible online via ECCO.

²⁵ *Slavery*, 1792, 29-31.

²⁶ See Alan Richardson, ed., *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Emancipation Period*; vol. 4: *Verse* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), 25-6. The poem appears also in Basker's and Wood's anthologies.

²⁷ In Bryan Edwards, *Poems, Chiefly Written in the West Indies* (Kingston, Jamaica, 1792), 37-9.

²⁸ *Slavery*, 1792, 31.

²⁹ Book II, ll. 270-361; see also John Singleton, *A General Description of the West-Indian Islands* (Barbados, 1767), Book III, ll. 322-477.

³⁰ See Richardson, 75-7; printed also by Basker and Wood. This was not Cowper's first use of the idea: see *The Task* (1785), Book II, where a diatribe against slavery (ll. 1-47) is followed by general reflections on natural disasters as instruments of divine vengeance, with a specific reference to hurricanes in Jamaica (l.53n).

³¹ *Pieces of Rhyme* (Edinburgh, 1793), 12-13.

³² *Ibid.*, 13.

³³ Ibid., 73-77.

³⁴ “To **** ” dated 9th November 1795, *Trifles in Verse*, 1798, 86-8.

³⁵ Op. Cit., 89, dated 15th November 1795.

³⁶ For an account of Wilberforce’s speech, Kimber’s trial, and press coverage of the story, see Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 180-5.

³⁷ *Slavery*, 1792, 28.

³⁸ See Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, 2 vols. (London, 1808), 1.284-8.