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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED SOCIAL RESEARCH

SEMINAR PAPER
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SEVENTH FLOOR, SEMINAR ROOM 7003
AT 4PM ON THE 27 SEPTEMBER 1999.

TITLE: **"THE HISTORY OF MARY PRINCE": (THE FIRST NARRATIVE BY A SLAVE WOMAN TO BE PUBLISHED IN BRITAIN).**

BY: **DAMIAN SHAW**

NO: **447**

The History of Mary Prince

The History of Mary Prince (1831) is, as far as we know, the first and only account by a slave woman of her experiences to be published in Britain.[1] Its publication caused an immediate uproar which provoked three further editions within a year,[2] a petition on her behalf to the British Parliament, two vicious attacks against it in contemporary journals,[3] and two court cases for libel. At Prince's request, the biography was dictated for publication to her friend, the poet Susanna Strickland, in the Pringle's drawing room in London.[4] The account was then edited by Thomas Pringle after examining Mary as to its veracity.[5] Pringle stated that: 'The narrative was taken down from Mary's own lips by a lady who happened to be at the time residing in my family as a visitor. It was written out fully, with all the narrator's repetitions and prolixities, and afterwards pruned into its present shape; retaining, as far as was practicable, Mary's exact expressions and peculiar phraseology. No fact of importance has been omitted, and not a single circumstance or sentiment has been added. It is essentially her own, without any material alteration farther than was requisite to exclude redundancies and gross

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'Mary Prince [was] the only ex-slave woman presently known to have written in Britain against slavery.' Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others, British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 5. Mary Prince was still, technically, a slave in Antigua when her story was recorded. Ferguson's 'written' should be interpreted broadly, for though Prince claimed a modicum of literacy, she dictated her story for publication.

No copies of the 2nd and 4th editions have been found thus far. All references in this paper will be to *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, related by Herself, with a supplement by the Editor*, ed. by Thomas Pringle, 3rd edn (London: Westley and Davis; Edinburgh: Waugh and Innes, 1831). Reprints of *Mary Prince* are to be found in *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, ed. by Moira Ferguson (London and New York: Pandora, 1987), and in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. by H. L. Gates Jr (New York: New American Library, 1987).

James Macqueen, 'The Colonial Empire of Great Britain, Letter to Earl Grey, First Lord of the Treasury, &c. &c., From James Macqueen, Esq.,' *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (November 1831), pp. 744-764, and 'The Anti-Slavery Society, and the West Indian Colonists,' *Bermuda Royal Gazette* (22 November 1831).

'The idea of writing Mary Prince's history was first suggested by herself. She wished it to be done, she said, that the good people in England might hear from a slave what a slave had felt and suffered.' Pringle, preface to *Mary Prince*.

Pringle cross-examined Prince with the help of the anti-slavery activist, Joseph Phillips, who had known her in Antigua.

grammatical errors, so as to render it clearly intelligible.'[6] Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen say, correctly, that 'the truth of Pringle's editorial comment is borne out by the language of the narrative.' They support their argument with several examples drawn from the narrative, including, as they say, Prince's 'down-to-earth' expression, use of creolized English, 'live' situation reportage and 'admissions of the difficulty of expressing herself.'[7] This narrative, then, stands in stark contrast to most edited slave narratives of the period where 'all Africanisms, all the special images and metaphors from the vernacular, were suppressed.'[8] Proceeds of the publication were given to a fund for Mary's future benefit.[9]

The text itself consists of a preface, Prince's narrative, an appendix and a sixteen page editorial supplement detailing the furore provoked by its original publication. As such, *Mary Prince* is indeed a 'multitiered narrative'[10] which gives insight not only into the life experience of a slave woman both in the West Indies and in England, but also into the ideas of a range of people on either side of the slavery debate. The 'voices' in this history range from anti-slavery activists and washerwomen in England to slaves, planters, magistrates, priests and ship captains in the West Indies. *Mary Prince* is a social history in itself. A synopsis of her life will provide a preliminary context and structure for a discussion of Pringle's response to the two most contested issues in the narrative, ill-treatment and virtue.

Prince was born in Bermuda in about 1788. 'As an infant,' she says, '[...] I was bought along with

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Pringle, Preface to *Mary Prince*.

Edwards and Dabydeen, p. 157.

For further commentary on standard editorial practices of the time see Janheinz Jahn, *A History of Neo-African Literature / Writing in Two Continents*, tr. O. Coburn and U. Lehrburgen (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp. 126-127.

See the postscript to the second edition, reprinted at the end of the preface of the third edition.

Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, p. 282.

my mother by old Captain Darrel, and given to his grandchild, little Miss Betsey Williams' (p. 1). Betsey's mother, Mrs. Williams was 'kind-hearted' but ill-treated by her husband. 'My poor mistress bore his ill-treatment with great patience, and all her slaves loved and pitied her' (p. 1). Mary recalls the first twelve years of her life with qualified fondness: 'I was made quite a pet of by Miss Betsey, and loved her very much. She used to lead me about by the hand, and call me her little nigger. This was the happiest period of my life; for I was too young to understand rightly my condition as a slave' (p. 1). At the age of twelve she was sent to nurse the son of a Mrs Pruden, who did 'not treat [her] very unkindly' though she struck Mary once (p. 2). Then Mrs. Williams died, and Mr. Williams sold her and other household slaves, in the presence of her mother, to a Captain I. for £57. Mary feared that she would never see her family again. The slaves of the new household were persistently tortured and flogged by Captain and Mrs. I.: 'My mistress often robbed me too of the hours that belong to sleep. She used to sit up very late, frequently even until morning; and then I had to stand at a bench and wash during the greater part of the night, or pick wool and cotton; and often I have dropped down overcome by sleep and fatigue, till roused from my state of stupor by the whip, and forced to start up to my tasks' (p. 7). Mary's 'aunt' and protectress in the household, a slave called Hetty, was beaten mercilessly after a cow she had fastened got loose. She miscarried and died shortly afterwards as a result. 'All the slaves said that death was a good thing for poor Hetty; but I cried very much for her death' (p. 7). Mary then had to assume all of Hetty's chores. Once, a jar with 'an old deep crack' in it broke and she was given a hundred lashes the following day:

> Oh sad for me! I cannot easily forget it. He tied me upon a ladder, and gave me a hundred lashes with his own hand, and master Benjy stood by to count them for him. When he had licked me for some time he sat down to take breath; then after resting, he beat me again and again, until he was quite wearied, and so hot (for the weather was very sultry), that he sank back in his chair, almost like to faint. While my mistress went to bring him a drink, there was a dreadful earthquake. Part of the roof fell down, and every thing in the house went - clatter, clatter, clatter. Oh I thought the end of all things near at hand; and I was so sore with the flogging, that I scarcely cared whether I lived or died. [...] It was an awful day for us all (p. 8).

On the next occasion when she was beaten and kicked by Captain I., she ran away, back to her mother, but her father returned her. She nevertheless stood up to Captain I. verbally in the presence

of her father. '[Captain I.] told me to hold my tongue and go about my work, or he would find a way to settle me. He did not, however, flog me that day' (p. 9).

After five years of harsh treatment at the hands of the I.'s, she was sent to Turk's Island where she was sold to a Mr. D and sent to labour in the salt works. Apart from the illnesses and boils caused by the work, she was continually ill-treated:

> Though we worked from morning till night, there was no satisfying Mr. D--. I hoped, when I left Capt. I--, that I should have been better off, but I found it was going from one butcher to another. There was this difference between them: my former master used to beat me while raging and foaming with passion; Mr. D-- was usually quite calm. He would stand by and give orders for a slave to be cruelly whipped, and assist in the punishment, without moving a muscle of his face; walking about and taking snuff with the greatest composure. Nothing could touch his hard heart - neither sighs, nor tears, nor prayers, nor streaming blood; he was deaf to our cries, and careless of our sufferings. - Mr. D-- has often stripped me naked, hung me up by the wrists, and beat me with the cow-skin, with his own hand, till my body was raw with gashes. Yet there was nothing very remarkable in this; for it might serve as a sample of the common usage of the slaves on that horrible island (p. 10).

On Turk's Island Prince also witnessed the murder of other slaves. After ten years she left it, still as a slave of Mr. D. Conditions for her in Bermuda were slightly better, but still oppressive. She rescued Miss D. one day from being cruelly beaten by her drunken father. She was probably being sexually abused by Mr. D. at the same time, but she alludes to this indirectly only:

> He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked, and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him I would not come, my eyes were so full of shame. He would then come to beat me. [...] I then told him I would not live longer with him, for he was a very indecent man - very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh (p. 13).

In Bermuda, Prince attempted to start to make some money of her own (in order to buy her freedom), seeing that there was more opportunity of doing so than on Turk's Island. 'By about 1814 she inveigle[d] being sold to Mr & Mrs John Wood because they live[d] in Antigua where

manumission [was] less difficult to obtain,'[11] but the Woods persistently refused to sell Prince her freedom even though they manumitted five other slaves during her time with them. Mr. and Mrs. Wood, as well as a free mulatto woman, Martha Wilcox (who 'was a saucy woman, very saucy' (p. 14)), continued to make Prince's life a misery. There is a suggestion that Mrs. Wood's ill-treatment of Mary was the result of sexual jealousy.

On one occasion, Mary appeared before a magistrate: 'I was also sent by Mrs. Wood to be put in the Cage one night, and was next morning flogged, by the magistrate's order, at her desire; and this all for a quarrel I had about a pig with another slave woman. I was flogged on my naked back on this occasion: although I was in no fault after all; for old Justice Dyett, when we came before him, said that I was in the right, and ordered the pig to be given to me' (p. 15). She also set about in earnest to earn her freedom, which she was able to do as she had more free time: 'I took in washing, and sold coffee and yams and other provisions to the captains of ships. I did not sit idling during the absence of my owners; for I wanted, by all honest means, to earn money to buy my freedom.[12] Sometimes I bought a hog cheap on board ship, and sold it for double the money on shore; and I also earned a good deal by selling coffee. By this means I by degrees acquired a little cash. A gentleman also lent me some to help to buy my freedom - but when I could not get free he got it back again. His name was Captain Abbot' (p. 16).

She attended a Methodist prayer meeting, which impressed her and 'led [her] spirit to the Moravian church' (p. 17). There, she met and married a man called Daniel James who had bought his freedom. The Woods were extremely angry because she had not asked their permission and flogged her. 'However,' says Mary, 'Mr. Wood afterwards allowed Daniel to have a place to live in our yard, which we were very thankful for' (p. 18). Later, she persuaded the Woods to let her accompany them to England. When she arrived in London she had severe rheumatism and St. Anthony's fire,[13] but was still made to do washing; 'but the English washerwomen who were at work there, when they saw that I was so ill, had pity upon me and washed them for me' (p. 19). After two or three months, and

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Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, p. 285.

The innuendo here is that she was not doing so by 'dishonest' means, such as prostitution.

Erysipelas, a painful inflammation and sub-cutaneous swelling of the skin.

several arguments with the Woods, she eventually walked out on them, believing herself to be free in England. She contacted the Moravians in Hatton Garden. A poor shoe black (Mash) and his wife took her in and treated her illness as best as they could. A Mrs. Hill told her about the Anti-Slavery Society. She went to them and they gave her 'a little money from time to time' (p. 20). They attempted to purchase her freedom in Antigua (wither she wished to return) from Mr. Wood, but he refused obstinately. She was forced to make her living as best she could, mostly as a charwoman.[14] Finally, she was employed by the Pringles as a charwoman and her history was written down by '[her] good friend, Miss S--' (p. 23). She ends her narrative, which Pringle says is given 'as nearly as was possible in Mary's precise words', with the following impassioned plea:

> I have been a slave myself - I know what slaves feel - I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me. The man that says slaves be quite happy in slavery - that they don't want to be free - that man is either ignorant or a lying person. I never heard a slave say so. I never heard a Buckra[15] man say so, till I heard tell of it in England. Such people ought to be ashamed of themselves. They can't do without slaves, they say. What's the reason they can't do without slaves as well as in England? No slaves here - no whips - no stocks - no punishment, except for wicked people. They hire servants in England; and if they don't like them, they send them away: they can't lick them. Let them work ever so hard in England, they are far better off than slaves. If they get a bad master, they give warning and go hire to another. They have their liberty. That's just what *we* want. We don't mind hard work, if we had proper treatment, and proper wages like English servants, and proper time given in the week to keep us from breaking the Sabbath. But they won't give it: they will have work - work - work, night and day, sick or well, till we are quite done up; and we must not speak up nor look amiss, however much we be abused. And then when we are quite done up, who cares for us, more than for a lame horse? This is slavery. I tell it, to let English people know the truth; and I hope they will never leave off to pray God, and call loud to the great King of England, till all the poor blacks be given free, and slavery done up for evermore (p. 23).

6.1.1: Care and Abuse: The Clemency of the Horsewhip

For instance, a Mrs. Forsyth: 'In the spring I got into service with a lady, who saw me at the house where I sometimes worked as a charwoman. This lady's name was Mrs. Forsyth. She had been in the West Indies, and was accustomed to Blacks, and liked them. I was with her six months, and went with her to Margate. She treated me well, and gave me a good character when she left London' (p. 22).

'A West Indian white.'

Prince's stated desire is to let the 'truth' of slavery be known - of which a large part is the ill-treatment slaves suffer. Prince's story is in part a chronicle of the physical and mental abuse that she suffered (the sexual abuse is also hinted at.)[16] What is remarkable, however, given that this opportunity to speak her mind in printed form might easily have resulted in a litany of specific allegations against various people and nothing more, is that Prince's story is a full life history. She tells not only of her own sufferings (and that of her family and other slaves), but also details the noteworthy acts of kindness, friendships, partnerships and alliances in her life, which are cross-racial, cross-class and cross-cultural.[17] As such, it becomes difficult to accuse her of dictating, or Pringle of writing a rhetorical anti-slavery tract, which could then be discounted by the pro-slavery lobby on the grounds that it was *merely* rhetorical.[18] Being rhetorical is exactly what James Macqueen, the editor of the *Glasgow Herald*, accuses Pringle of, rather than Mary Prince: 'but if I can extract, as I trust by the aid and strength of truth to be able to do, Pringle's sting, and Pringle's venom, out of Mary's tale, all her other accusations must of necessity drop off harmless and despicable.'[19] Nevertheless, Macqueen does his best to discredit Prince's accusations of ill-treatment, at least against the Woods, by attempting to prove that she was well-treated by them. He attempts to do so by adducing the testimony of several people who knew her at the time: amongst others, two pastors, three doctors, several people in the

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Ferguson shows how Mary Prince 'sparingly but strikingly alludes to that concealed area of her life taken up with sexual abuse and harassment.' *Subject to Others*, p. 285.

This calls into question Macqueen's assertion that Mary had reputedly told another Antigonian that 'those who questioned her desired her to state only that which was bad concerning her master and mistress!' Macqueen, p. 748.

'The pro-slavery advocates (one of whom baptized her) query only the intensity of the cruelty she alleges, and not the account itself.' Ferguson, introduction to *Mary Prince*, p. 25.

Macqueen, p. 744. Macqueen can hardly suppress his own racist venom and violence, though. He speaks of 'black filth' (p. 751), and says that not even the power of the British government 'can alter human nature, nor make the lowest description of African savages, or the childrens' children of these savages, industrious, intelligent, and civilized, in a year, or in an age.' (p. 753). He also recommends that someone should 'take Pringle by the neck, and with a good rattan or Mauritius *ox* whip, lash him through London.' (p. 752) Concerning 'sting' and 'venom', Macqueen was probably not aware of the final couplet of Pringle's 'Bushman Song' (1825): 'And none who there his sting provokes, / Shall find its poison vain'.

Wood's employ, the free 'woman of colour'[20] Martha Wilcox, and her own husband, Daniel James. Most of these claim that Mary was never beaten, except for Ann Todd, 'another respectable female of colour,'[21] who claims that she was 'punished but once by Mr. Wood, and that was with a horsewhip.'[22] Daniel James, in a letter to Mr. Wood, claims that Mary had never been punished by him 'to his knowledge', but, considering that Mr. Wood had ordered him to be turned off his property when she left them in London, it would be unlikely that he would be too outspoken against him if he wanted to stand any chance of getting his lodgings back.[23] Another witness produced by Macqueen against Prince is Martha Wilcox, whom Mary mentions, and who seems to have borne her a long-standing grudge:

> Molly[24] had the very same food that her master and mistress had. Mrs Wood, herself, gave her her food; and when Mrs Wood was sick, I gave it to her. Mrs Wood gave her, the last year I was in the family, three suits of clothes at Christmas; and Mr Wood gave her 8lbs. of flour, 8lbs. of pork, 4 dollars, and a bottle of rum. She got four or five suits during each year, independent of Christmas clothing; very good Irish linen, muslin to make gowns with, shoes for constant wear, and stockings. She was treated so well, not like a servant, that she had a regular breakfast and dinner out of the house, independent of her allowance of 9 bits, 6s. 9d. per week. [...] I never remember Molly being punished at all. She never was at peace with any servant that ever lived in the house. The principal cause of her ill temper was because she was not allowed to go out after bedtime.[25]

Macqueen, p. 748.

Macqueen, p. 749.

Apparently, this was considered to be a 'light' form of punishment.

Pringle doubts the accuracy of James' alleged testimony on the grounds that he had a letter in his possession from James to Mary, dated April 1830, 'couched in strong terms of conjugal affection; expressing his anxiety for her speedy return.' Pringle, *Mary Prince*, p. 30.

Mary Prince was alternatively known as Mary Princess of Wales, Molly Prince, Molly Wood and Mary Wood. Presumably, she was given different names by other owners as well.

In Macqueen, p. 748. Mary's favoured status with the Woods seems to have roused the jealousy of many other servants and slaves.

Wilcox's statement that Mary was treated 'so well, not like a servant' is telling in Macqueen's case. He, like many slave owners, was attempting to prove on the one hand that their own slaves were well treated (though this implies that most other slaves were less well-treated), but on the other hand that the 'colonial character in general'[26] was so benevolent as to make the ill-treatment of slaves both unlikely and rare. The contradiction between the assertion of slave-owning benevolence and the tacit acknowledgement that some slaves were mistreated causes two major displacements in his argument. The first is that the issue of who exactly maltreated whom is always deferred, the blame laid in another quarter. For instance, the Rev. Mr. Curtin says: 'Mr and Mrs Wood were both, I believe, from Bermuda, where the owners of slaves are remarkable for their humanity and attention to their domestics.'[27] The suppressed claim that slaves were less remarkably treated elsewhere results in a inter-colony rivalry in the race for respectability in the eyes of the world.[28] Pringle is quick to point out the link between these two illogicalities. If Mr. Wood *were* proved to be the 'very *best* and *mildest*' of slave-owners, then 'what is to be expected of persons whose mildness, or equity, or common humanity no one will dare vouch for? If such things are done in the green tree, what will be done in the dry? - And what else then can Colonial Slavery possibly be, even in its best estate, but a system incurably evil and iniquitous? - I require no other data - I need add no further comment.'[29]

The second major displacement, caused by the first, is that when people discuss relative ill-treatment, the issue of slavery itself is elided altogether in the argument. The possible rights of slaves as human beings are simply not imagined. This is where Pringle's theory that slavery debases both master and servant has its place. Slavery, by its very nature, he argues, results in

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Macqueen, p. 750.

In Macqueen, p. 748.

A strategy which ultimately did not work in the metropolis. As C. Duncan Rice notes, the designation 'West Indian' in English literature was already 'a useful shorthand for depravity' by 1818. C. Duncan Rice, 'Literary Sources and British Attitudes to Slavery', in *Anti-Slavery, Religion and Reform*, ed. by Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (Folkestone: Dawson & Sons, 1980), 319-334 (p. 328).

Pringle, supplement to *Mary Prince*, p. 36n.

ill-treatment as people have a natural tendency to be brutish when no restraint is placed on them. Furthermore, slavery itself is ill-treatment. James Macqueen and the Woods fail, or are unable, to recognise that a large part of Mary's ill-treatment consists not only of her 'condition as a slave' (which merely includes forced labour), but also her recognition of that condition, a point which both Prince and Pringle stress throughout.[30]

As the Woods' legal ownership of Mary represents the only power they have over her, they are loathe to part with it, as appears in this scene when Mary Prince once again asks to buy her freedom: 'Mrs. Wood was very angry - she grew quite outrageous - she called me a black devil, and asked me who had put freedom into my head. "To be free is very sweet," I said: but she took good care to keep me a slave. I saw her change colour, and I left the room.'[31]

Whereas the West Indians and their supporters attempted to dilute Prince's accusations of ill-treatment by trying to prove that she was treated 'well', Pringle accepts her accounts of ill-treatment in general. His witnessing of the slave system over the six years of his residence in South Africa gives him the colonial experience to say that 'the facts' of Mary's story are 'indeed shocking, but unhappily not the less credible on that account.'[32] His underlying philosophy, which came to be widely accepted in anti-slavery circles, is that 'Slavery is a curse to the oppressor scarcely less than to the oppressed: its natural tendency is to brutalize both.'[33] It is unlikely that Mary would have espoused this philosophy, but its effect for Pringle is to focus all attention on slavery itself as an inherently brutalising and violent system. The day to day details of that system (which constitute most of Mary's history) are treated by Pringle as symptomatic of a general disease. Assertions of 'mildness' and humane treatment by pro-slavery advocates become irrelevant, therefore, to the major issue in Pringle's view. For him, Mary's history serves

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See *Mary Prince*, p. 1.

Ferguson discusses the psychology of this situation in her introduction to *Mary Prince*, pp. 16-18.

Pringle, *Mary Prince*, p. 37.

Pringle, *Mary Prince*, p. 37.

as an illustration: 'The case affords a most instructive illustration of the true spirit of the slave system, and of the pretensions of the slaveholders to assert, not merely their claims to a "vested right" in the *labour* of their bondmen, but to an indefeasible property in them as their "absolute chattels".'[34] His major attack on Mr. Wood is not primarily concerned with the details of his treatment of Mary, but with the fact that he refuses to free her in order to '*punish*' her.[35] Pringle treats Mary's story largely as a representative case history, and says that her case 'is by no means a singular one.'[36]

In general, the pro-slavery advocates in this case use the argument of 'good treatment' to enhance their own respectability, to make Mary Prince seem ungrateful, and to avoid raising the issue of slavery itself. Pringle claims that ill-treatment is an inevitable consequence of slavery, and, therefore, that slavery is the real evil to be tackled. Prince would still have the same grounds for complaint, even if she had never been ill-treated.[37]

6.1.2: Virtue or Immorality: 'A Tissue of Hypocrisy'

Another powerful tactic of the pro-slavery lobby was to stress the supposed immorality and/or dubious Christianity of slaves in order to discredit them. This was a thorny problem for the Anti-Slavery movement, given the nearly indissoluble links between itself and the Christian mission. It is not surprising that the movement usually attempted to portray slaves (at times dishonestly) both as being 'virtuous' and as being converted, or potential converts to Christianity. Mary Prince must have been aware of her need to appear both virtuous and Christian, having had extensive contact with the Anti-Slavery society both independently and through the Pringles, as

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Pringle, *Mary Prince*, p. 37.

Pringle, *Mary Prince*, p. 36.

Pringle, *Mary Prince*, p. 40.

Neither Pringle nor Prince seem to be aware of the possible abuses inherent in systems of waged labour. For both, Mary's passage from slave to hired servant represents her 'freedom'.

well as with Quaker ladies, Moravians and several pastors in England and the West Indies. Her awareness of the uneasiness felt with regard to sex, even sexual abuse, may explain why she merely alludes to the sexual abuse she suffered in the West Indies. Instead, she emphasises her marriage with Daniel James. She also stresses her religious history, especially her first contact with the Moravians in Antigua: 'I never knew rightly that I had much sin till I went there. When I found out that I was a great sinner, I was very sorely grieved, and very much frightened' (p. 17).[38] She also tells of her Christian education in England:

> My dear mistress [Mrs. Pringle] teaches me daily to read the word of God, and takes great pains to make me understand it. I enjoy the great privilege of being enabled to attend church three times on the Sunday; and I have met with many friends since I have been here, both clergymen and others. [...] Nor must I forget, among my friends, the Rev. Mr. Mortimer. [...] I trust in God I have profited by what I have heard from him. He never keeps back the truth, and I think he has been the means of opening my eyes and ears much better to understand the word of God. Mr. Mortimer tells me that he cannot open the eyes of my heart, but that I must pray to God to change my heart, and make me know the truth, and the truth will make me free.I still live in hope that God will find a way to give me my liberty, and give me back to my husband (p. 22).

Prince admits that the 'eyes of her heart' are not yet fully open. She also links spiritual freedom, in the final two sentences above, with physical liberty and the return to her husband. It seems most likely that her attitude towards the church was equivocal. On the one hand, she has enough belief in Christianity to be 'very much frightened' at its threats of punishment. On the other, she uses the church as a space in which to escape from the drudgery of slavery and work (especially in the West Indies), but more importantly, as a space in which to develop social networks which will be of benefit to her in her quest for freedom. In other words, she 'uses' the church for her own purposes. This 'insincerity'[39] of religious belief in slaves, because they were using the church to become free, avoid work, etc., is the point pro-slavery advocates most often attacked, masking their real fear that certain

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This may be an allusion to her sexual 'misconduct' in the eyes of the church.

Compare Macqueen's assertion that 'savages' could never be 'civilized', i.e., Christianised amongst other things. Macqueen, p. 753.

church groups would 'put freedom into [their] heads', which Mrs Wood is quoted as saying.[40] As the Bermuda Royal Gazette maintains, Pringle 'sees nothing but purity in a prostitute because she knew when to utter the name of the Deity, to turn up the whites of her eyes, and make a perfect mockery of religion.'[41] Pringle freely admits that Mary's religious education was 'still but very limited, and her views of Christianity indistinct,' but states that her belief 'has nothing of insincerity' in it.[42] Pringle does not attempt to lie about Mary's religious attitudes, content that she is on the road to conversion. For him, her virtue in religious terms rests in this; for her opponents, her religious virtue is a utilitarian sham.

A potentially far more damaging charge against Mary, levelled by her pro-slavery antagonists, was that of her sexual 'misconduct'. Such an accusation might have the effect of a) discrediting her virtue in the eyes of the religiously motivated anti-slavery movement, and b) confirming the widespread prejudice that black (slave-) women were all immoral and, therefore, to be treated with contempt. As noted above, Prince says very little about her sexual liaisons in her history. She does, however, mention a certain incident involving a court case and a 'pig', which 'old Justice Dyett' had tried, and 'ordered the pig to be given to [her]' (p. 15). Martha Wilcox, Mary's one-time rival in the Wood household, interprets this incident in a different manner:

> A woman, named *Phibba*, came to lodge a complaint to Mrs Wood, that Molly had taken away, not her '*pig*,' but '*her husband*,' and she, Molly, in the presence of Mrs Wood, and myself, fought the woman until she tore her down on the steps. The woman then took Molly before a magistrate, (*Mr Dyett*,) where she was punished. She was turned out of the Moravian chapel, and afterwards went and abused the Moravian parson for it. She took in washing, and made money by it. She also made money many, many other ways by her badness; I mean, by allowing men to visit her, and by selling * * * * * to worthless men.[43]

Mary Prince, p. 18.

'The Anti-Slavery Society, and the West Indian Colonists', *Bermuda Royal Gazette* (22 November 1831), p. 144.

Pringle, *Mary Prince*, p. 35.

In Macqueen, p. 748. One wonders at Mary's possible wry amusement when she related the 'pig' incident to the straight-laced Miss Strickland (afterwards Mrs Moodie).

Macqueen *et al* eventually proved their point about Prince's sexual activities (though, predictably, the sexual abuse she suffered is never mentioned). As Joan Grant puts it: 'In the course of the two court cases all the allegations about her alleged immorality came out. Quite simply she had lived with a white captain (Abbot) for seven years. [...] Also, she had found another woman in bed with the said captain and had assaulted her. The woman had taken Mary Prince before the Magistrates where the case was thrown out. She had lived with another man who had promised to free her and had left him when he had failed to keep his word. She left Captain Abbot after he had killed a man on Mr. Wood's ship.'[44] Macqueen also uses these allegations against Mary to make insinuations about Pringle's character. For instance, he says that 'after secret closetings and labours with Mary, (in London maid-servants are not removed from the washing-tub to the parlour without an object,) he stood forward publicly as her knight-errant.'[45] Pringle ignores this rhetorical innuendo. His defence of Mary's conduct operates on several levels. Firstly, he quotes a letter from Mr. Wood to Sir Patrick Ross' secretary, in order to attack it, but conspicuously omits the section concerning the 'pig' incident. His footnoted explanation for the omission reads as follows:

> I omit the circumstance here mentioned, because it is too indecent to appear in a publication likely to be perused by females. It is, in all probability, a vile calumny; but even if it were perfectly true, it would not serve Mr. Wood's case one straw. - Any reader who wishes it, may see the passage referred to, in the autograph letter in my possession.[46]

The effects of this are to suggest that John Wood himself is not decent to have written such things (even if true), that it is more or less indecent to be interested in such personal details anyway, but that Pringle himself is not trying to hide anything. Indeed, Pringle quotes at length, in the booklet, from a letter by the anti-slavery campaigner Joseph Phillips (who knew both the Woods and Prince in Antigua), where her relationship with Captain Abbot is acknowledged:

Joan Grant, 'Call Loud', *Trouble and Strife*, 14 (1988), 9-12 (p. 12).

Macqueen, p. 750.

Pringle, *Mary Prince*, p. 27.

> Of the immoral conduct ascribed to Molly by Mr. Wood, I can say nothing further than this - that I have heard she had at a former period (previous to her marriage) a connexion with a white person, a Capt. ---, which I have no doubt was broken off when she became seriously impressed with religion. But, at any rate, such connexions are so common, I might almost say universal, in our slave colonies, that except by the missionaries and a few serious persons, they are considered, if faults at all, so very venial as scarcely to deserve the name of immorality. Mr. Wood knows the colonial estimate of such connexions as well as I do; and, however false such an estimate must be allowed to be, especially when applied to their own conduct by persons of education, pretending to adhere to the pure Christian rule of morals, -- yet when he ascribes to a negro slave, to whom legal marriage was denied, such great criminality for laxity of this sort, and professes to be so exceedingly shocked and amazed at the tale he himself relates, he must, I am confident, have had a farther object in view than the information of Mr. Taylor or Sir Patrick Ross. He must, it is evident, have been aware that his letter would be sent to Mr. Allen, and accordingly adapted it, as more important documents from the colonies are often adapted, *for effect in England.*[47]

The chief aim of this frank admission is to point out Mr. Wood's hypocrisy, but the open assertion that sexual mores differ vastly in slave colonies from England does not damage Pringle's case, for the assumption is that such mores are caused by colonial circumstance and the system of slavery itself. If Christians in England found such mores morally repugnant, they should attack their cause. Furthermore, Pringle blames any possible misconduct of Prince's on her owners: 'how strong a plea of palliation might not the poor negro bring, by adducing the neglect of her various owners to afford religious instruction or moral discipline, and the habitual influence of their evil *example* (to say the very least,) before her eyes? [...] All things considered, it is indeed wonderful to find her such as she now is. But as she has herself piously expressed it, "the God whom then she knew not mercifully preserved her for better things".'[48] In this way, the owners are debased by the system of slavery more than the slaves, for the slaves are open to redemption by God, whereas the owners are hypocrites who have sold their Christian 'birthright' to redemption, because their moral conduct dismisses them from taking part in the 'civilising mission' (setting a good example, in Pringle's terms).[49] Finally, however,

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Joseph Phillips, in supplement to *Mary Prince*, p. 32.

Pringle, *Mary Prince*, p. 35n.

Compare the final six lines of Pringle's sonnet, 'The Caffer' (1827):

> He is a Robber? - True; it is a strife
> Between the black-skinned bandit and the white.

Pringle returns to the point that Mary's character and reputation are not the most critical issues:

> But after all, Mary's character, important though its exculpation be to her, is not really the point of chief practical interest in this case. Suppose all Mr. Wood's defamatory allegations to be true - suppose him to be able to rake up against her out of the records of the Antigua police, or from the veracious testimony of his brother colonists, twenty stories as bad or worse than what he insinuates - suppose the whole of her own statement to be false, and even the whole of her conduct since she came under our observation to be a tissue of hypocrisy; - suppose all this - and leave the negro woman as black in character as in complexion, - yet it would not affect the main facts.[50]

And the main fact is simply that Mr. Wood refuses to free her in order to punish her. Mary's virtues or vices, therefore, says Pringle, should not be taken into account when considering the issue of her slavery. Ferguson speaks of Pringle's 'desire to launder or morally and psychologically simplify the *History*.'[51] Surely, if Pringle had wanted to do so, he would simply have edited controversial topics out of Prince's narrative before publishing it, which he specifically claimed not to have done. Rather, Pringle avoided lengthy discussion of Prince's sexual conduct in his own notes (though he does mention it) firstly to protect her, and secondly because it was beside the point he was making, other than serving as proof that slavery itself drove slaves to sexual profligacy.

Pringle, writing to Fairbairn in Cape Town, says the following: 'Do you see how Macqueen is abusing me in Blackwood's? I will ere long reply to his misinterpretations (not to his abuse) in a fourth edition of "The History of Mary Prince." Meanwhile I am prosecuting him for libel. Abuse is what we must all expect & in truth it is a distinction to be thus calumniated in such a cause.'[52] The

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A Savage? - Yes; though loth to aim at life,
Evil for evil fierce he doth requite.
A Heathen? - Teach him, then, thy better creed,
Christian! if thou deserv'st that name indeed.
In Pereira and Chapman, p. 68.

Pringle, *Mary Prince*, p. 35.

Ferguson (1987), p. 14.

Pringle to Fairbairn, FB:I:144, 31 December 1831.

precise historical truth of Mary Prince's life, and the arguments surrounding it, will never be known. What we can take at face value, and what was a truth for Pringle at the heart of this passionate debate, is Prince's statement on behalf of her fellow slaves: 'All slaves want to be free -- to be free is very sweet' (p. 23).

[Dr DJ Shaw]