Introduction

Rule, Britannia, rule the waves;
Britons never will be slaves.

James Thomson's now emblematic georgic, "Rule Britannia," perfectly encapsulates a specific moment in the evolution of British culture when the "nation" and the "Briton" began to coalesce. Written some thirty years after the Act of Union (1707) which bound England, Scotland, and Wales into Great Britain, the poem simultaneously celebrates and delineates a common sense of "Britishness" that binds the nation and provides a sense of national imperative. The "charter of the land" impels "Britons" not only to "rule the waves" but also to "never be slaves."[1] This pairing of commerce and freedom becomes a lightning rod for poets, writers, and revolutionaries. The "blest isle" withstands all challenges from "tyrants" and rises triumphant to the "dread and envy of them all." The glorious destiny of Britain is to be an exemplar of freedom to other nations through a sense of divine purpose coupled with supremacy over the seas. Though the specific historical context for the poem involved the trade war with Spain, Thomson's language establishes a more far-reaching image of Britishness. The poem introduces succinctly the most significant rhetorical construct of the later eighteenth-century—national identity.

Thomson's use of the term "Briton" reflects a developing, unified sense of national identity intended to move beyond the regional identities of "Welsh," "English," and "Scottish" that divided the island. Though the term "Briton" dates to the end of the thirteenth century, it came into common use during the eighteenth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term since the Act of Union to mean "a native of Great Britain, or of the British Empire." The question of who qualifies as "native" becomes central to the idea of the Briton, and this question is addressed directly in the debate to abolish the slave trade in the latter half of the century. While many different strains of thought contributed to the construction of national identity during this time, no other cause brought so clearly into conflict Britain's "charter" of commerce and freedom.

The voluminous scholarship on slavery and the slave trade seems to leave little room for new or interesting analyses. For many years, historians monopolized the field and finely parsed the economic, social, and political implications of African slavery on Europe, Africa and the Americas. Older historical studies tended to

[1] The poem, first printed in 1740, was part of a masque, titled "Alfred," written by Thomson and Mallett. It quickly became popular and was set to music by the most famous composer of the time, Thomas Arne. For a history of the poem, see Edward Rimbault Dibdin's "The Bi-Centenary of 'Rule Britannia'" in *Music and Letters*, 21.3 (1940): 275–290.

divide the African slave trade by national participants and compartmentalize abolitionist thought. American scholars wrote about slavery in the United States, British scholars focused on slavery in Britain and her colonies, and so on. The multi-national interconnectedness of movements for and against slavery and the slave trade demanded closer attention. The newest books by David Brion Davis and Christopher Leslie Brown offer readings specifically of Britain's and America's successive antislavery campaigns. Davis's *Inhuman Bondage* seeks to situate American slavery in the "larger contexts of the Atlantic Slave System." The scope of his analysis extends far beyond a study of British slavery so there is little opportunity to investigate the subtleties of the first abolitionist campaign. Brown's analysis provides a clearer trajectory for the development of antislavery thought in Britain from the "haphazard" to the moment at which the movement "coalesced." [2] His careful research on the strands of argument and how they came together, however, lacks close reading of the primary texts.

Literary scholars have opened the field of slavery studies to a different sort of scrutiny in order to examine the extent to which "slavery" provided powerful literary tropes. Romanticists like Peter Kitson and Debbie Lee have firmly placed British abolition and writings about slavery within the Romantic period.[3] Recent studies by Markman Ellis, Deirdre Coleman, Debbie Lee, Suvir Kaul, and Srinivas Arvamudan examine the poetry and prose of the abolitionist movements in relation to sentimental or Romantic literary trends of the later century.[4] However, these scholars tend to focus on abolitionist rhetoric to the virtual exclusion of proslavery response, an approach which fails to appreciate the dialogue between proslavery and antislavery that actively captured public interest in the later century. A more recent study by Brycchan Carey does a noteworthy job of tracing the influence of sentimental rhetoric on British abolitionism.[5] He uses a broader variety of sources including pamphlet and newspaper accounts; however, his study and the others

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[2] David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2; Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

[3] Kitson and Lee co-edited the now landmark reprint series *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999). This excellent, if highly selective, survey of antislavery texts helped to launch a new wave of fruitful literary scholarship.

[4] Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Deirdre Coleman, *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Debbie Lee, *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Suvir Kaul, *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire: English Verse in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

[5] Brycchan Carey's *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760–1807* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

view antislavery language as a product of Romanticism, which limits the reading of other influences on the arguments. Abolitionist and proslavery writing shape socio-cultural trends; therefore, they utilize a number of literary and non-literary forms of persuasion to present each case.

Another dynamic field of scholarship that has entered into the study of slavery is the study of rhetoric. This field, well nigh totally dominated by American scholars, focuses on American antislavery and proslavery almost to the exclusion of all other influences. Excellent recent works on proslavery rhetoric in the South by Patricia Roberts-Miller and antislavery rhetoric by Jacqueline Bacon and Glen McClish examine the different strains of argument evident in poetry and prose.[6] Jacqueline Bacon's study of the relationship between rhetoric and empowerment of white women and African Americans in antebellum America "recovers" the marginalized voices in a movement that is ironically about marginalization. However, these studies either ignore or only give passing acknowledgement to the influence of British abolitionists and slavery advocates in crafting many of the rhetorical strategies that American abolitionists later used. The gap my study seeks to address occurs at the nexus of these three disciplines. Through close reading and the application of rhetorical theory, I trace a trajectory of the development of British abolitionist and proslavery thought as being concomitantly focused on the development of national identity and the issue of slavery.

How does the language of a social movement and its opposition utilize rhetorical strategies to draw upon and contribute to the construction of British national identity? The first abolitionist campaign in Great Britain targeted the African slave trade and described it as a venture designed to corrupt and degrade the morals of the nation. The process by which the slave trade became the focus of "moral action" is detailed in Brown's *Moral Capital*. I extend his overview to a more direct interrogation of how arguments emerged to target the slave trade. In the development of the image of the Briton, no other issue could have established the rhetorical terrain of national identity as effectively. In the course of arguing for abolition, writers engaged in constructing a new sense of "native"—not as primitive but as civilized and British—and also questioned who had legitimate claim on the term. Through the latter portion of the eighteenth century, antislavery writers organized and focused their efforts on abolishing the slave trade by waging a successful campaign in print. The proslavery response, while initially less prolific, also grew to combat the increasingly serious accusations by abolitionists and proposed its own reforms to address the issues. Ultimately, the idea of "native" character and interests became the most consistent rhetorical topos on which

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[6] Patricia Roberts-Miller, "Robert Montgomery Bird and the Rhetoric of Improbable Cause," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35 (Winter 2005): 73–90; Jacqueline Bacon and Glen McClish, Descendents of Africa, Sons of '76: Exploring Early African-American Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 36 (Winter 2006): 1–29; Jacqueline Bacon, *The Humblest May Stand Forth: Rhetoric, Empowerment, and Abolition* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002).

both camps chose to present their individual cases for either the abolition or the preservation of the slave trade.

A complete catalog of all printed materials relating to slavery and the slave trade in the later eighteenth century is beyond the purview of this study. Such a catalog, while of infinite value as a list of materials, offers little by way of analysis. Nor does this study claim to be an exhaustive survey of all printed and manuscript documents produced during the time. Given the sheer volume of material, I have been deliberately selective in the documents chosen for analysis. I have not incorporated any manuscript sources as it is almost impossible to determine distribution. Some private letters have been consulted in order to trace the transatlantic influence in defining the opposition to the slave trade in particular. As my study is a reflection on audience perception, I have chosen documents with the widest known circulation and where possible I have included publication information for each. I have also generally avoided literary periodization and not classified these works according to any one period of literary trends. In other words, the arguments for national identity emerge from a brilliant mishmash of ideas that can be classified as products of the "Enlightenment" of "sentimentalism" of "Romanticism" and even of the "Age of Reason." I maintain that the confluence of all such ideas allowed for the development of nationalist rhetoric from this particular social, political, moral movement.

The slave-trade debates that took place over a roughly fifty-year time span captured public interest and became the *cause célèbre* by the end of the century.[7] These debates were well-known and closely followed by the reading public, which allowed writers to disseminate ideas that extended beyond opposition or support of the slave trade. Slavery, more specifically the slave trade, was a *national* problem that demanded a solution from the people of the nation. Rhetorical strategies used by each side relied upon particular constructions of nationhood and national character to make the respective arguments. Each side claimed to have a "truer" sense of the nature of the "Briton" and crafted appeals to propagate this perception. The slave-trade debates played a pivotal role in the emerging discourse of national identity and contributed to public understanding of Great Britain and her empire.

My study extends rhetorical, literary, and historical analyses of abolition to trace the repercussions of slave-trade rhetoric on the growing sense of British nationhood at the turn of the century. Historians have traced in painstaking detail the trajectory of abolition, beginning with Great Britain's initial involvement with African slavery. Their studies focus primarily on why the antislavery campaigns succeeded and what factors influenced the success of abolition. Through historical reconstruction, we know that the movement against the transatlantic slave trade arose out of a favorable confluence of cultural and political factors. In the late eighteenth century, Great Britain was the site of multiple reform movements that

[7] While the most active period of these debates occurred between 1788 and 1792, the arguments that came into common usage during that time developed much earlier in both Great Britain and the colonies.

sought to address inequalities within British society. These movements questioned aspects of society, like the rigid social hierarchy, the uneven distribution of wealth, and what "natural rights" should belong to all citizens of the Crown. Each social movement proposed particular changes to ameliorate current conditions, and they created a dynamic cultural climate that encouraged clearer definitions of the nation and the character of its citizens. This atmosphere of reform, as detailed in Chapter 1, drew upon philosophical, social, and economic theories to create a common vocabulary on which both proslavery and antislavery writers built their arguments. Abolitionists contributed to the emerging discourse of national identity in hopes of shaping a moral, Christian Briton for whom the slave trade would be anathema. By contrast, proslavery writers offered the image of an affluent, commercially savvy Briton, who understood the value of trade and would seek a more moderate solution. Both camps responded to and appropriated elements of the other's arguments to advocate their particular vision of the "Briton."

This analysis focuses on how the rhetorical strategies used in the slave-trade debates helped to shape the identity and character of the "Briton." Both sides produced canny arguments that responded to public perceptions of the morality and legality of the slave trade. These arguments can be read as a series of dialogues among diverse groups, consisting of proponents, opponents, and the greater reading public in Great Britain. Denouncing or advocating the slave trade on legal and moral grounds required a common conceptual framework that appealed to all audiences. Antislavery crusaders delineated this conceptual framework in the 1770s when their ideas first began to receive serious attention from the reading public. Since the proslavery contingent initially had stronger support, their arguments for slavery relied upon biblical justification and commercial value as insuperable rationale. Antislavery writers first had to establish that a specific problem existed before pushing for reform. Slavery as a general evil could not be successfully argued to a public that had little if any direct understanding of the institution. While audiences in the mother country had little understanding of the institution, colonials were much savvier. The transatlantic exchange of ideas proved invaluable in helping to define both the exact danger of slavery and how to focus the cause against slavery.

Concrete examples that emphasized the humanity of the African while simultaneously questioning the humanity of the European proved more effective than blustering condemnations from the pulpit. Early activists like Anthony Benezet and Granville Sharp proposed an alternate understanding of the institution of slavery as one that tainted the high ideals of the nation and corrupted the character of the Briton. As the public began to accept this view of slavery and the slave trade, the balance of power shifted and proslavery writers found they could no longer rely upon the standard defenses of slavery. The common rhetorical battlefield of the debates was the concept of a shared British national identity, which became central to both abolition and anti-abolition. Over the course of the debates, writers proved highly responsive to their audiences and their opposition in crafting their respective set of attributes comprising national character.

Investigating the debates entails a "mapping" of the changes in the rhetoric used by both proslavery campaigners and antislavery/abolitionists. Each side develops arguments that respond to a complex mixture of factors such as geographical location, legal decisions, and publications with opposing viewpoints. Understanding the relationship between these factors necessitates a systematic plotting of the shifts in argument over the roughly sixty-year time span covered in this analysis. The chapters span discrete time periods during which significant "transformations" in arguments take place and discuss both the antislavery/abolitionist and proslavery perspectives. "Transformations" produce evolving constructions of national identity that respond to changes in political and social climate over time. The earliest emergence of the debates in the 1760s and '70s focuses on defining the problem, consolidating support and changing legal decisions within Great Britain. Writers from both camps initially address audiences in specific geographical locations (for example, London, Philadelphia, and so on) and generally appeal to regional identities. However, these regional identities are highly complicated by the interaction of the mother country and the colonies. By the 1780s, writers begin to develop arguments that focus less on regional distinctions such as English or Pennsylvanian and more on divisions between mother country and colonies. With the formal organization of the abolitionist movement at the end of the 1780s, the rhetoric of both camps includes discussions of who qualifies as legitimate citizens of Britain and what characteristics those citizens should embody. By the 1790s, the most dynamic period of the debates, the public demonstrates a strong engagement with the arguments and their constructions of British identity. Both proslavery and abolitionist rhetoric found sympathetic audiences, and by the first decade of the nineteenth-century the "victory" could not be simplistically handed to the abolitionists. Instead, I argue for a more complex reading of this seeming triumph by contending that a synthesis occurs in the claims of both camps and a combined identity, one that leads naturally to imperialism and a sense of global superiority, emerges.

To trace the significant "transformations" in the debates, I employ rhetorical analysis and theory in order to establish the importance of each shift in strategy. The slave-trade debates exerted a singular influence on the British public precisely because the battles were waged openly in print rather than behind the closed doors of Parliament. At their height between 1788 and 1792, the variety of publications numbered in the hundreds, spanned every genre from fiction to non-fiction to poetry, and circulated throughout the empire. Using the classical Aristotelian "modes" of rhetoric as organizing principles, I illustrate how arguments for and against abolition made successive use of ethos, logos, and pathos appeals. Mapping the debates requires an understanding of the motives driving each shift in argument and the meaning produced by these transformations. Kenneth Burke's focus on "transformations" as productive of meaning in *A Grammar of Motives* will be utilized in my discussion of proslavery and antislavery/abolitionist appeals to "Britons" in their respective arguments. His discussion of "circumference" and his dramatic pentad prove particularly useful in exploring shifts in rhetorical

arguments within and between each camp. Writers participating in the slave-trade debates develop arguments that define territorial boundaries and the metaphysical nature of national character. Identifying a writer's "circumference," a concept which refers to the cosmology constructed by the writer for the reader, allows for an understanding of the particular assumptions made about the audience. The changes in "circumference" occur with the writers' negotiations of identity and their audience's access to that identity. Finally, the dramatic pentad offers a framework for a nuanced examination of rhetorical changes within a piece of literature and over the course of a single activist's career.

Analysis of this dialogue reveals that writers continuously revised the predominant characteristics of the "Briton" in response to audience and opposition. The position of the author in relation to his or her audience directly influenced the shape and tone of the arguments advanced, a significant nuance that is ignored when looking for general literary or historical trends. In the 1770s, the issue of slavery began to attract more attention from a larger audience that spanned two continents. Writers in both Great Britain and her Colonies produced numerous documents that sought to represent the "true" nature of slavery to their particular audiences; however, the type of slavery under discussion differed according to geographic location. Among early antislavery activists, a divide appeared between authors located in Great Britain and authors located in the Colonies. Writers in Great Britain who had little direct contact with African slaves tended to advocate the total abolition of slavery, but colonial writers sought a more gradual abolition that would begin by outlawing the transatlantic slave trade. Chapter 2 discusses the impact of antislavery crusaders who provided an initial template for abolitionist rhetoric against the standard defenses of slavery. The colonial Quaker activist, Anthony Benezet, inspired the London activist Granville Sharp to refine his arguments and set particular goals. Both writers approached their topics as though slavery was commonly accepted as a problem, but their arguments differed sharply in terms of providing a concrete solution. Their "circumferences" clearly emerged from geographic location and personal experiences of slavery. While Sharp focused on the issue primarily with respect to the mother country, he found Benezet's descriptions of colonial atrocities compelling. He eventually understood that immediate emancipation would not be a feasible solution and accepted the strategy of his colonial counterpart. Ironically, the development of the anti-slave-trade movement came from the American colonies, which then proceeded to sever its ties with the mother country. The interaction between these crusaders influenced the arguments of other writers who took up the task of getting a broader segment of the population to acknowledge the evils of slavery.

Chapter 3 discusses how other activists brought more diverse perspectives and expanded the form of abolitionist writing after Benezet and Sharp. More women began to take an active part in manipulating public sympathies and created works of poetry and fiction that incorporated images of the atrocities of slavery. Diversity in writers prompted a diversity in forms of writing as the anti-slave-trade appeals expanded into fiction and poetry. These other genres enabled writers to dramatize

the experience of slave trading and slave holding more effectively. Poetic appeals to the "compassionate" and the "moral" Briton often preceded detailed depictions of the horrors of slavery. Poets identified the traits that characterized a British conscience and portrayed the horrors endemic to the condition of slavery as antithetical to British character. Some of the most effective translators of the slave experience to poetry were British women who expanded the image of the Briton to include members of their sex. The 1770s and '80s were marked by the publication of literature by former slaves. Slave narratives dictated or written by Ukawsaw Gronnionsaw (1770), Ottobah Cugoano (1787), and, most importantly, Olaudah Equiano (1789) disproved theories of African racial inferiority. The *Letters of Ignatius Sancho* (1781) provided an intimate glance into the life of a middle-class Afro-British man who successfully blended antithetical aspects of his personal identity. Perhaps the most inspiring publication came in the form of verse by the young Phillis Wheatley, which was first published in London in 1773. The excellence of her poetry resonated on several levels by defying stereotypes of race and gender and providing abolitionists like Granville Sharp with powerful evidence against racial stereotypes of African slaves.

The proponents of the slave trade initially regarded antislavery writers as mere nuisances; over forty years, however, a significant shift in power occurred. Chapter 4 outlines the gradual changes in argument and tone of proslavery rhetoric as writers respond to an increasingly powerful opposition and an unsympathetic public. Initially, the slave trade and slavery had the tacit approval of an apathetic public because most antislavery tracts published prior to the 1770s barely elicited a response from proponents and were not perceived as threatening planter and trader livelihoods. However, public sentiment forced both traders and planters gradually to assume a defensive rhetorical position and refute the growing list of abolitionist claims. The harsh and profoundly disturbing nature of abolitionist accusations expanded proslavery arguments in significant ways, and many writers countered the push for abolition by proposing their own reforms. These writers, who were primarily from the West Indies, had to carve a place for themselves within the nation that was consistent with the "civilized" qualities of national character. They sought to reconcile images of the Briton as moral and Christian with the importance of trade and respect for property upheld by British law. Elements of their arguments resonated with the public and instigated an organized abolitionist rebuttal.

The most dynamic period of the debates resulted from the active engagement between proslavery and abolitionist writers regarding the nature of the British empire. Arguments from each camp coalesced during the four years following the introduction of the bill for abolition. From 1788 to 1792, each side solidified its image of the Briton and began to discuss the implications of these competing images for the rest of the world. Chapter 5 examines the last stages of the debates from the first inquiry into the slave trade in 1788 to abolition in 1807. During this time, both proslavery and abolitionist "circumferences" broadened to include a more global perspective. Abolition would have implications not only for Great Britain, but the whole "civilized" world. The elements of national character

advocated by each side began to take on an increased significance because each side also sought to claim for Great Britain the top place in the international arena. By the conclusion of the debates a synthesis of characteristics had occurred that produced an image of the globally aware and morally superior Briton. The form of national identity that emerged from the slave-trade debates of the late eighteenth century directly contributed to British imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

By the early twentieth century, the British empire spanned the globe and included an array of races, religions, and cultures, unified by a sense of "Britishness" which came into being in the eighteenth century. The campaigns for and against the slave trade contributed significantly to this sense of unified British imperial identity. To see the first abolitionist movement only in terms of its immediate goal limits our understanding of this dynamic instrument of cultural change. This dialogue was an integral part of public discourse in its time and commanded the interest of a considerable segment of the reading public. Historical analyses take an overarching perspective that sometimes subsumes the vibrant and rigorous nature of the debates to a specific teleology. More recent historical study has challenged this view, but the studies still offer limited close reading, which can flatten the nuances of argument. Literary analyses tend to view only some of the writing of abolitionists that conform to specific literary movements, such as Romanticism and sentimentalism. Close reading of the shifts in the debates reveals that writers of the time were concerned with more than immediate abolition. The rhetorical appeals of these writers reflected multiple transformations in social composition and strains of thought. Analyzing the debates from the perspective of rhetoric offers a fresh approach and an opportunity for nuanced reading. First and foremost, this debate attempted to persuade the public into participating in the idea of a collective national, commercial, moral identity, and understanding this mode of persuasion requires a careful study of the shifts in argument of this dynamic movement.