

URQUHART, ELIZABETH F., M.A., Hair and Masculinity in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. (2006)

Directed by Dr. Stephen B. Stallcup. 30 pp.

This essay examines the use of forced hair cutting in the late fourteenth-century alliterative romance, *Morte Arthure*, to show how it is used to develop characters that reflect the tension surrounding the English king Richard II and the tyranny that characterized the final years of his reign. It includes a survey of legislative and social attitudes toward the beard and hair during the Middle Ages and examines the use of hair as a symbol of masculinity in Arthurian romances of the period. The two episodes involving forced tonsure in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* are analyzed to show the significance of the beard and its removal in establishing King Arthur as a tyrant.

URQUHART, ELIZABETH F., M.A., *The Rhetoric of the Pennsylvania Antislavery Quakers, 1688–1780*. (2006)  
Directed by Dr. Karen A. Weyler. 31 pp.

This essay addresses the sustained appeals on the part of Pennsylvania Quaker abolitionists for more than ninety years, examining the points consistently made by the leading figures in the movement. It also explores the differences between the slaveholding and anti-slavery factions within the Pennsylvania Society of Friends to explain why modern researchers apply the term “gradualist” to the abolitionists’ call for manumission.

**HAIR AND MASCULINITY  
IN THE ALLITERATIVE  
*MORTE ARTHURE***

and

**THE RHETORIC OF THE PENNSYLVANIA  
ANTISLAVERY QUAKERS, 1688–1780**

by

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**APPROVAL PAGE**

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## HAIR AND MASCULINTY IN THE ALLITERATIVE *MORTE ARTHURE*

Two pivotal episodes in the late-fourteenth-century Alliterative *Morte Arthure* (AMA) entail forced tonsure—the removal of beards—as an act of humiliation or punishment. The first involves King Arthur’s encounter with the grotesque, cannibalistic giant on Mount Saint Michael, who seeks to add Arthur’s beard to a cloak ornamented with the beards of other kings he has conquered. The second incident occurs shortly after Arthur’s knights have defeated the Emperor Lucius’s forces, when Arthur spares two surviving Roman senators but orders their beards to be shaved before he sends them back to Rome.

Although King Arthur’s reaction to the beards in the giant’s cloak is one of outrage, the shaving episode—which is unique to the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*—exposes Arthur’s hyper-masculinity and aggressive abuse of power, and it predicts the excesses that characterize the remainder of his Italian campaign. Between these two episodes involving forced tonsure, Arthur undergoes a metamorphosis from a respected and even-tempered monarch—who is justifiably indignant toward Lucius and who avenges the innocents harmed by the giant on Mount Saint Michael—to a king who humiliates captured ambassadors and embarks on a rampage through Italy.

This essay argues that the poet’s use of forced tonsure of the envoys is more than a simple, formal parallel to the cloak of beards that early in the poem hints at a

forthcoming change in Arthur. The emasculation symbolized by shaving the Roman ambassadors is a gesture that reinforces Arthur's masculinity and growing willingness to abuse his power. It is an act that reflects both the weakness of Richard II, whose own masculinity (and therefore his suitability as king) was a subject of speculation both before and after his fall (Fletcher 5-6), and his tyrannical behavior toward the end of his reign.

To demonstrate the political specificity of the poet's use of forced tonsure, it is important to show the larger context of how any act of forced hair cutting would resonate with a late-medieval audience. An examination of law and fashion related to hair reveals its importance as an emblem of masculinity and power (whether legitimate or not), and a review of medieval textual representation of beards shows the historical and cultural view of the beard as a significant symbol of masculine power. As an established marker of masculinity, hair is so valuable that its forced removal would have been viewed immediately as an unacceptable act of aggression.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper assumes the dating of the AMA to be the late fourteenth century. In her examination of contemporary texts reflected in the poem, Mary Hamel places the poem at the very end of the century [Mary Hamel, ed., *Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition* (New York: Garland, 1984) 250]. Larry Benson dates the AMA to the period between 1399 and 1402 [*King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthure and Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994)]. For purposes of this essay, this dating supports the assumption, as suggested by Patricia DeMarco ("An Arthur for the Ricardian Age: Crown, Nobility and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Speculum* 80 (2005): 465), that the crises surrounding the governance of Richard II in the late fourteenth century deeply mark the literature of that era, including the AMA.

By including two vivid parallels between the grotesque giant and King Arthur, the poem illustrates the poet's own anxiety about the use and abuse of power, which is reflective of the concerns that the late-medieval audience had regarding their own king. This undisputedly masculine Arthur—whose victories in battle glorify his knights and England, but whose actions later become tyrannical—thus reflects the conflicted perception of Richard II and the anxiety surrounding his behavior in the decade prior to his deposition in 1399. He is characterized as a pacifist who also imprisoned and executed his rivals; an effeminate “youth,” who was also portrayed as a tyrant; an effete who sustained his court in luxury while he exhausted his nobles' fortunes under taxes; and a “tyrant” who nevertheless avoided the military engagements necessary to support England's knights and esquires. In scenes depicting King Arthur's aggression and authoritarianism, the AMA reflects the contemporary anxieties about Richard II, whose own unchecked treatment of his subjects ultimately led to his downfall.

### **The Significance of Hair and Beards in Medieval England**

Hair has been described as a sexual symbol, as currency or “the royalty of kings,” and even as a representation of divinity (Leach 148), and the aggressive cutting of hair has been regarded for centuries and across cultures as a symbol of social control.<sup>2</sup> The history of legislation protecting the beard illustrates the seriousness with which a late-medieval audience would have viewed not only the action of forced cutting, but

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<sup>2</sup> C. R. Hallpike, “Social Hair,” *Man*, New Series 4 (1968): 263.



also its perpetrator. By the late Middle Ages, the beard had been protected for centuries by law, and those who violated a man's beard were considered criminals in the eyes of the law.

Throughout the Middle Ages, laws protecting the beard and hair proscribed even the slightest injury to either, clearly establishing the importance of the beard as a symbol of masculinity and power. For example, Anglo Saxon law forbade certain "injuries and assaults to the person." Under these laws, "the outrage of binding a free man, or shaving his head in derision, or shaving off his beard, was visited with heavier fines than any of the gravest wounds."<sup>3</sup> Penalties were imposed for removing another's beard in twelfth-century Europe as well, when Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa levied fines for shaving a man against his will (Reynolds 50–51).

Forced hair cutting would not simply have violated ancient code for the AMA audience. Beards are generally described as fashionable in England throughout the Middle Ages, and they are frequently used as social markers of various kinds. By the time of the Norman invasion, there was a clear distinction between the short-haired, clean-shaven Normans and the long-haired, whiskered Anglo-Saxons. In fact, King Harold's scouts returned with the mistaken conclusion that the Norman army consisted almost entirely of priests, because in England only priests shaved their beards.<sup>4</sup> In fact,

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Pollock, "Anglo-Saxon Law," *The English Historical Review* 8 (1893): 263–64.

<sup>4</sup> Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*, New York: Columbia UP, 2003: 38. In her examination of the influence of imperialism on the

even as late as 1190, some Englishmen were supposedly still maintaining a tradition of wearing beards to express their hostility to the Normans,<sup>5</sup> illustrating the use of hair and beard styles as a symbol of political sentiment.

In *Apologia de Barbis*, a late twelfth-century discussion of beards, the French cleric Burchard of Belleveaux<sup>6</sup> writes in Latin to “lay-brothers” (or *conversi*<sup>7</sup>) to make amends for an earlier statement criticizing those who wore beards. Burchard’s explanation of his opinion consists of three highly allegorical sermons that argue for the conservation rather than the removal of laymen’s beards. The entire *Apologia* is based on the assumption that beards and hair, like clothing, are simply an outward indication of inner and spiritual realities.<sup>8</sup>

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Arthur romances, Heng notes that Norman figures in the Bayeux tapestry are conspicuously clean-shaven, and beardedness among Norman elites constituted a deviation from the norm in Norman court culture.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Bartlett, “Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th Ser. 4 (1994): 45. Bartlett’s survey provides a number of accounts in which it was preferable to die rather than live without a beard.

<sup>6</sup> Giles Constable, introduction, *Apologia de Barbis*, by Burchard of Belleveaux, ed. R. B. C. Huygens (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 68. According to Constable, Burchard’s *Apologia de barbibus* is the only known work devoted to beards published between the *Misopogon* (Beard Hater) of Julian in 353 and J. P. Valarian’s *Pro sacerdotum barbibus* in 1531.

<sup>7</sup> The lay-brothers were a distinct group of workers within a monastery who were assigned special duties, mostly agricultural labor, and wore beards to identify them as laymen (Constable 124).

<sup>8</sup> Burchard reflects this in his advice to the reader of the *Apologia*: The careful reader should observe that it [the *Apologia*] is divided into three chapters, respectively on the cleanness, composition, and nature of beards. In these, consideration should also be given to what relates to the mystery of faith and what relates to manners” (430).

In his first chapter, Burchard lists the inner qualities associated with beards, noting that they signify wisdom, fortitude, beauty, and strength (Constable 146). In the third chapter, he describes beards as signs of fortitude, wisdom, maturity, and religion. Throughout the *Apologia*, Burchard distinguishes between the outer and inner significance of the beard, a focus that reflects the fact that, as the Middle Ages advanced, the symbolism of beards became increasingly detached from their physical reality (Constable 69).

In addition to the growing recognition of beards as a symbol in the Middle Ages, the beard remained fashionable throughout the medieval period, as Richard Corson notes. In his comprehensive account of hair and beards throughout the ages, he remarks on the sustained popularity of beards from the eleventh through the fourteenth centuries. Although beards fell out of fashion in the thirteenth century in both England and Europe, “the fourteenth century brought a return to long hair and beards [in England]—among the nobility at first, then gradually spreading to the general populace” (103). Edward II of England was proud of his long beard, which he wore carefully curled, and after his death in 1327, although shaving had become commonplace among both nobles and commoners, “there begins a great bearded age ... the pattern being the long, flowing beard of Edward III” (Corson 104). The Black Prince, Richard II’s father and the son of Edward III, is depicted with moustaches that dangle outside his armor. Richard II is bearded in portraits throughout the 1390s (Whittingham,

12–15), and images of Edward III's long beard and Richard's much shorter, tufted beard are depicted in their tomb effigies in Westminster Abbey.<sup>9</sup>

By the time the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* was written, the historical significance of the beard in law and society was well established. A powerful marker, the beard was a recognized indicator of social status, physical maturity, and masculinity, prevailing even over material wealth when it came to a man's masculinity and reputation. By the late Middle Ages, beards were probably regarded as a mark of strength and energy in both a physical and moral sense, and by the late fourteenth century, references to the beard and hair as symbols of masculinity and power had appeared in accounts from the Bible, to travel accounts, to romance narratives (Constable 60).

### **The Beard in Romance Literature**

The beard as indicator of masculinity in daily life was reinforced by the literature of the Middle Ages, which "used the presence or absence of a beard as a visual sign that the text of the body should be read against a particular set of gendered norms."<sup>10</sup> The beard is employed in medieval romances, such as *La Chanson de Roland* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as a metaphor for masculinity, age (and therefore authority), and wealth—something that, if removed, would result in loss of manhood, wisdom

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<sup>9</sup> Phillip Lindly, "Absolutism and Regal Image in Ricardian Sculpture," *The Royal Image of Richard II and the Wilton Diptych*, eds. Dilian Gordon, Lisa Monnas, and Caroline Elam (London: Harvey Miller, 1997): 66–7.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey J. Cohen, "Medieval Masculinities: Heroism, Sanctity, and Gender," *Interscripta* (April 1995) 15 September 2006. <<http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/e-center/interscripta/mm.html>>.

(therefore legitimate leadership), and prosperity. In these poems, the strongest knights and most feared competitors are invariably defined as such by their beards.

In the twelfth-century *Chanson de Roland*, descriptions of Charlemagne's gallantry — and that of his knights — repeatedly begin with an account of the beard. As Charles's divisions approach the Saracens to do battle, Baligant — the emir of Babylon — focuses on the Franks' beards, not their armament or horses, as he anticipates the impending encounter:

“See the pride of France the renowned!  
The emperor rides forth most fiercely;  
He is in the rear with his *bearded* men.  
Over their [shields] they have cast their *beards*,  
Which are white as snow on ice.”(3315–19, my emphasis)<sup>11</sup>

Here, the Franks' beards are a physical symbol of fierceness, and as they merge with the knight's shields, the body becomes a kind of text to be read by all, especially enemies. Throughout *Roland*, mention of a knight's beard immediately precedes an assumption of a vigorous fight: “They will strike with lance and sword. / We shall have a hard and violent battle; / Never has anyone seen such an engagement” (3320–22).

The physical characteristic used most frequently to describe Charles is his long white beard, which typically flows out over his armor. Set against his “shapely” limbs and proud countenance, Charles's beard is white, as is his “blossoming-white” crown

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<sup>11</sup> All quotations from *La Chanson de Roland* are from the translation by Glyn Burgess (New York: Penguin, 1990) and are cited by line number.

(116-7). The emperor's beard, used variously to depict Charles in deep contemplation, as he approaches battle, and in profound grief, comes to reflect his masculine power and overt sensibility. Connected with Charlemagne, the beard indicates the king's great wisdom and strength. His white beard means he is the oldest among his troops, a military survivor who is the epitome of the powerful warrior, and whose battle skills make him a force to be reckoned with.

The beard also is also a signifier of legitimacy in *Roland*. Throughout the poem, knights swear upon their beards, to the exclusion of other physical or acquired belongings:

Says Blancandrins: "By my right hand, I say,  
And by this beard, that in the wind doth sway,  
The Frankish host you'll see them all away; (49-51)  
.....  
Nay, by this beard, that you have seen grow blench,  
The dozen peers by that would stand condemned. (261-62)  
.....  
Says Oliver: "Now by my beard, hereafter  
If I may see my gentle sister Aude." (1720-21)

The poet's use of the beard to convey solemnity of purpose is significant, as swearing upon one's beard serves as a sensory reminder of the importance of the vow.

Charlemagne himself swears upon his beard: "Be silent, both of you; / By this white beard of mine which you see, / The twelve peers are not to be nominated" (259-61). In so swearing, the king makes an oath that restrains his audience from further argument, as "the Franks stay quiet, well and truly silenced" (262).

The beard appears later in the poem as a symbol of control and submission. The master cook, Besgun, is instructed by Charlemagne to guard the captive Count Ganelon—the knight who has betrayed the French troops—“as befits a criminal.” To punish the traitor, the cook and other members of the king’s household beat Ganelon and pluck out his beard and moustache. This display of control emphasizes the significance of the beard as a representation of masculinity, and its removal defines the shame befitting Ganelon’s treachery.

Throughout *Roland*, the beard is an effective signifier of body as text, one that expresses a social ordering in the way that it is worn or used by characters. As a surrogate shield, it is a marker of chivalry and uncontested masculinity; when touched or invoked, it legitimizes oaths and promises; and its removal signifies dominance and submission.

The beard as an indicator of undeniable masculinity is used similarly in other poems of the late Middle Ages. In the late-fourteenth-century alliterative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,<sup>12</sup> a giant, green-skinned knight who arrives at Arthur’s court on Christmas. The giant remarks derisively that “Hit arn aboute on this bench bot berdlez chylder” [“There are none but beardless children around this table” (280)], contrasting his own masculinity with a court he dismisses as prepubescent and unworthy—or incapable—of accepting his challenge. Insulted by the visitor’s taunts,

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<sup>12</sup> All quotations from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are from the translation by Brian Stone (New York: Penguin, 1974) and are cited by line number.

Arthur accepts the challenge to fight, but the king's swing of the axe leaves the giant "less unmanned and dismayed by the mighty strokes / Than if a banqueter ... had brought him a drink / Of wine" (336–8).

The visitor's huge green beard underscores his remarkable physicality: "The hair of his head ... floated finely like a fan round his shoulders; / And a great bushy beard on his breast flowing down, / With the heavy hair hanging from his head" (180–183). When Gawain takes up the challenge to strike the first blow with the giant's own axe, the sheer abundance of the hair makes it necessary for the giant to extend "his long and lovely locks ... over his crown, / Baring the naked neck for the business now due" (419–20); the giant's hair is so thick, the axe cannot not penetrate it to reach the neck, and he must move it aside. The giant's copious hair and beard leave little doubt that this imposing green-bearded visitor, whose height outstrips "earthly men," is a force unlike any other.

Later in the poem, in his quest to find the Green Chapel described by the strange visitor, Gawain meets his host, Sir Bertilak, who is described as "a powerful man in his prime, of stupendous size. / Broad and bright was his beard, all beaver-hued; / Strong and sturdy he stood on his stalwart legs" (844–6). Bertilak's beard—used again as a symbol of enormous masculinity, and the mention of which precedes other physical description—reinforces the host's suitability as a "prince of people with companions of mettle" (849).

As a symbol of masculinity, assets, maturity, and authority, the beard in romance literature becomes a predictable marker of chivalry and absolute masculinity. As a



result, for a late medieval audience, removing the beard through public tonsuring would have reduced the wearer of the beard to a position of powerlessness. It would have been seen as an aggressive act of symbolic excess that publicly established a relationship of dominance (the shaver) and submission (the shaved), as an examination of the uses of forced shaving in the Middle Ages reveals.

### **Forced Shaving as Symbol of Dominance in the Middle Ages**

In medieval society, enforced baldness was equated with debility, disqualification, and subservience, and offenses to the hair were especially noted in an honor-oriented society, considering the significance attached to the head in general and to its role as a battle trophy (Sayers 188). Laws mandating tonsorial practice, notwithstanding church regulations, were still very much in practice in late medieval times.

Shearing the hair and beards represented a potent penalty that is documented as late as the end of the twelfth century: “[Shaving] did not primarily aim at cruelty as an end to itself, but rather as a reminder to all who saw the punished ... that he had committed a serious violation against community interests” (Powers 7). In fact, the laws of medieval military justice allowed such juridical mutilation, which regularly involved the removal of the hair and beards as a form of punishment, and humiliation of defeated enemies was common, especially following a siege. If surrender was unconditional, this

would be symbolized by the clothing and manner of the defeated garrison.<sup>13</sup> But throughout the Middle Ages, it was not only military justice that involved forced hair cutting to signify dominance over another.

Robert Bartlett describes various instances in which laws involving hair and beard styles served to create a distinct “quasi-ethnic” group within a population, including twelfth- and thirteenth-century Ireland, where hairstyle was a sign that distinguished the “the king’s loyal subjects” from “the wild Irish,” who were the king’s enemies. The English settlers in Ireland were required to maintain English tonsure, while the Irish continued to grow their hair long at the back in the style known as *culan*. Bartlett notes that the “politics of hair” continued in Ireland well into the Tudor period (46).

In the late Middle Ages, fools’ heads were routinely shaven, providing a protective marker of “otherness” while also signifying that fools were subordinate to the more powerful “normal” population.<sup>14</sup> Male brothel keepers in late medieval London were punished by shaving the beard and all of the head, save for a fringe, and in the fourteenth century, cruciform tonsure (in which all the hair is shaved except a patch in the shape of a cross) served as punishment for adultery and other crimes (Jones 104).

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Prestwick, *Armies and Warfare in the Middle Ages: The English Experience* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996) 303. At Stirling in 1304, Oliphant’s men came out of the shattered castle barefoot, with ashes on their head, and the burghers of Calais in 1347 were forced by Edward III to make their way out of the town with halters around their necks.

<sup>14</sup> Malcolm Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages*, Westport: Praeger (2003) 103–4.

Clearly, the importance of the beard and hair as symbols of masculinity, and the social stigma resulting from its forced removal, would have been understood by a late medieval audience. From the laws that enforced any insult to the beard to its contemporary use as a punishment for civil crimes or marker of otherness, it is clear that forced tonsure was an image that would have been recognized as more than an image in the AMA. As a demonstration of power and dominance, Arthur's public use of shaving becomes symbolic behavior, signaling the change foreshadowed by the giant on Mount Saint Michael.

#### **Hair and Masculinity in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure***

Two incidents examined in this paper—the slaying of the giant on Mount Saint Michael and the shaving of the Roman senators—demonstrate the change in Arthur by depicting the domination and submission achieved through forced hair cutting. In them, the poet contrasts Arthur's outrage at the giant's forced tonsure in the earlier episode with his later, willing perpetration of the act. But the poem also provides other parallels involving markers of aggression and tyranny displayed by Arthur, the Emperor Lucius, and the giant, which serve to develop Arthur as a reflection—and later, a manifestation—of the tyrants he encounters in the poem.

Having set out to defy Rome's claim to tribute and dominion over Britain and Britain's territories on the continent, King Arthur musters his knights and crosses the channel at Barfleur, where allies from fifteen realms await them. Here, the main narrative stops, as Arthur is summoned to an encounter with a cannibalistic giant who

has been terrorizing the local populace, abducting and raping women and devouring infants and children.<sup>15</sup>

Horrified by the account of the brutality of the giant, Arthur vows to avenge the giant's victims. Refusing the help of his knights, Arthur insists on engaging the giant in single combat. As he approaches the lair, he meets a widow who describes the giant's peculiar garment, a cloak composed of beards extorted from defeated kings:

But he has a kyrtil on,      kepted for hisselven,  
That was spunnen in Spain      with special birdes,  
And sithen garnisht in Greece      full grithely togeders.  
Is hidid all with here,      holly over,  
And borderd with the berdes      of burlich kinges,  
Crisped and combed      that kempes may know  
Ich king by his colour,      in kith there he lenges.  
Here the fermes he fanges      of fifteen rewmes,  
For ilke Estern even,      however that it fall,  
They send it him smoothly      for saught of the pople. (998–1007)<sup>16</sup>

[He has a kirtle on, which he keeps for himself, that was spun in Spain  
by specially chosen women and afterward fitted together and

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<sup>15</sup> Helmut Nickel, "The Fight About King Arthur's Beard and for the Cloak of King's Beards," *Arthurian Interpretations* 16 (1985): 2. Nickel verifies the source of the giant as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, but suggests the AMA poet developed his own version of this segment of the Arthur story, choosing language and details from each to develop his plot, but more importantly his characters. Nickel suggests that, although the giant was always a fiendish rapist/cannibal, he became connected with the cloak of beards only in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*.

<sup>16</sup> All quotations from the AMA are from *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Ed. Larry D. Benson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994) and are cited by line number. Translations (except where noted) are from *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: The Owl and the Nightingale and Five other Middle English Poems*, Ed. John Gardner (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1973) and are cited by page number.

fashioned in Greece. It is covered over entirely with human hair and bordered about with the beards of stately kings, crisped and combed so that fighting men may know each king by his color, in the country where he lives. He takes the tribute here of fifteen realms, for on every Easter Eve—however it may happen—they send him a beard, by their pact, for the safety of the people (29).]

As described by the widow, the Mount Saint Michael giant lives outside the law and seeks no feudal “rente” or “gold,” but instead takes as tribute the symbol of the defeated kings’ masculinity; he declares himself nobility in his own right and identifies each defeated king by the color of his beard.

The creature basks by a fire among the ruined bodies of its victims, some of whom are tied together on a skewer being turned over a fire by captured maidens. Arthur challenges the giant to combat, during which he defeats the seemingly indestructible beast (after several remarkable recoveries and retaliations by the giant) and slices off the giant’s genitals. Arthur claims his rightful battle trophies—the giant’s club and the kirtle of king’s beards.

The beards demanded by the giant (in lieu of any other tribute) is the first of a number of parallels between Arthur and the poem’s other tyrants (the giant of Mount Saint Michael and the Emperor Lucius). Other details reappear in the second “shaving” episode: the widow advises Arthur to approach the giant on knee, without his armor, and to “call him thy lord;” a gesture that is reintroduced when the defeated and suppliant Roman senators approach Arthur to plead for mercy. Further foreshadowing the transformation in Arthur is the manner in which the giant keeps the seized beards.

They are carefully preserved and arranged according to color, specifically so that their kinsmen can identify them later. Later, the maniacal King Arthur who—practically declaring himself divine—spares the defeated envoys, shaves their heads and beards, and uses similar identification on the caskets of the dead nobles that he returns to Rome.<sup>17</sup> Arthur places the Romans' bodies in lead-lined caskets to preserve them for later recognition, and he marks the caskets to identify their origins:

Then they busked and bawmed      thir burlich kings,  
Sewed them in sendell      sixty-fold after  
Lapped them in lede,      less that that sholde  
Chand or chauffe      yif they might escheve  
Closed in kestes      clene until Rome  
With their banners aboven,      their badges there-under,  
In what countree they kaire,      that knightes might know  
Ech kink by his colors,      in kith where he lenged. (2298–2305)

[They carried back and embalmed them as suited their honor, clothed them in flowing silk, all sixty of them, and wrapped them in leaden shrouds, lest the bodies should be bruised or rotted from shifting about in the caissons. They closed them up in coffins to take them to Rome, their banners flying above and their emblems below, and in every country they pass the knights can tell each fallen king by his color and the land where he reigned (62).]

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<sup>17</sup> The similarities between the beards collected by the giant of Mount Saint Michael and Arthur's shaving of the Roman senators have been discussed in depth by a number of writers who suggest that the taking of beards by the horrific giant presages the fatal change in Arthur from a legitimate sovereign into a brute. See Juliet Vale, "Law and Diplomacy in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 23 (1979): 39; Mary Hamel, ed., *Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition* (New York: Garland, 1984) 292; and Helmut Nickel, "The Fight About King Arthur's Beard and for the Cloak of King's Beards," *Arthurian Interpretations* 16 (1985): 2.

Two surviving senators approach the king, barefoot and dressed in “kirtels alone,” and kneel before him (recalling the widow’s earlier advice to Arthur), begging him to grant them “life and limm.” Arthur spares the senators’ lives “through grace of myselven,” but then he has the senators shaved:

They shoven these shalkes shapely thereafter  
To reckon these Romanes recreant and yelden  
Forthy shove they them to shew for skomfit of Rome. (2333–35)

[To show these Romans for recreants and captives, and they shaved them shamefully, for Rome’s discomfort (62).]

The humiliation of the senators is not the only point of the scene. Just as Arthur recognized the significance of the cloak of beards and so demanded it, along with the club, as his share of the giant’s treasure, he emphasizes here his position as sovereign over Rome by confiscating the swords and beards of the suppliant senators. He returns the bodies of the senators to Lucius to pay the tribute the emperor had demanded, warning that dead bodies are the only tribute he will ever pay:

The tax and tribute of ten score winteres  
That was teenfullt tint in time of our elders;  
Say to the senatour the cite that yemes  
That I send him the sum; assay how him likes!  
But bid them never be so bold whiles my blood regnes  
. . . . .  
Ne to ask tribute ne tax by nokin title,  
But such tresure as this, whiles my time lasts. (2342–49)

[“For the tax and tribute of Rome for tenscore winters, the same tax cruelly taken in the time of our elders. Say to the senator who rules the city that I send him here the sum; let him count as he pleases! Let them

never be so bold while my blood reigns as to ever ... ask for a tribute or tax of any kind, for this is the treasure they'll get, while my time lasts" (63).]

Just as Arthur had previously seized the giant's symbolic capital of the beards as tribute; so he now applies that symbol of power to the war with Rome. Again, the physical body becomes text, as the corpses of the fallen Romans become the only "tribute" Arthur is willing to pay.

The shaving of the senators' beards heightens the perception of a new Arthur; it is at this point—immediately following Lucius's defeat—that his behavior changes for the worse. This change is especially obvious in his remarks immediately before the captives are shaved. When the senators petition for their lives, Arthur replies arrogantly, as if he has become divine—filled with grace<sup>18</sup>—and hands out a cynical justice:

"I graunt," quod the good king,      "through grace of myselven;  
I give you life and limm      and leve for to pass,  
So ye do my message      menskfully at Rome. (2320–22)

["I grant it," said the king, "through my own grace; I give you life and limb and leave to pass on condition that you carry my message to Rome. (62).]

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<sup>18</sup> The *Middle English Dictionary* refers to "grace" as "God's grace, God's gift or favor making men or angels fit for heaven, forgiveness." Other definitions include "help from God in a secular matter," "providence," "good fortune," or "good will, s. v. "grace," *Middle English Dictionary*, University of Michigan, 14 November 2006. <<http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/med>>. Mary Hamel suggests that Arthur's reference to his own "grace" is "self-damning" because, as a response to the Senators' invocation of Christ, it implies Arthur's own divinity (328).



In so sparing the ambassadors' lives, Arthur's conspicuous decree of his own grace signals his growing arrogance. His humiliation of the supplicants completes the transition in Arthur that began with his sinister treatment of the caskets of the dead Romans. He has become like the giant, indifferent to how his actions appear to others and willing to interpret laws to fulfill his pursuit of power.

This indifference is exposed by the fact that the humiliation of the defeated ambassadors would have violated the generally accepted laws of war. In addition to heralds and clerks, whose essential duties during war made them immune from violence, ambassadors were protected against hostile acts (Keen 196). The description of diplomatic activity associated with war is carefully described in fourteenth-century terms throughout the poem: Imperial ambassadors come and go under carefully stipulated safe-conducts (444); messengers from the marshal of France keep Arthur informed of the emperor's latest moves (1231-32); a herald brings news of Gawain's victory (3017-21).<sup>19</sup> If ambassadors were plundered, thereby breaking a formal safe conduct, their status aggravated the crime (Keen 196).

The debasement of the senators represents an unambiguous departure from Arthur's treatment of Lucius's ambassadors earlier in the poem.<sup>20</sup> At this point, the

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<sup>19</sup> John Barnie, *War in Medieval English Society: Social Values in the Hundred Years War, 1337-99* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974) 148.

<sup>20</sup> In his response to Lucius's demands for tribute early in the poem, Arthur assures the emperor's messengers they will not be harmed in returning to Rome, even promising to attend to their lodging himself: "My summons is certified, and you have been served / Safe conduct and

parallels between Arthur and the giant and Lucius are beginning to accumulate, as Arthur now moves to fulfill his earlier promise to lay siege to all the cities under Lucius's rule.

At this point, the similarities between the conquering Arthur and the "tyrant" giant at Mount Saint Michael become even more obvious. Arthur's arrogance after the fall of Lucius and his ironic sense of humor in returning the Roman bodies as "tribute" to Rome reflect the irreverent behavior of the cannibalistic giant, a "tyraunt" who "will lence out of law, as himself thinkes, / withouten license of lede, as lord in his owne" (996-997). The tyrannical Arthur is clearly foreshadowed by the giant that rapes women, kills and devours "crismed childer" (baptized children), and torments widows, and who is not substantially different from the king who now wreaks similar havoc in Tuscany:

Into Tuskane he turnes      when thus wel timed  
Takes townes full tite      with towres full high;  
Walles he welt down,      wounded knightes,  
Towres he turnes,      and tourmentes the pople,  
Wrought widowes full wlonk      wrotherayle singen,  
Oft werye and weep      and wringen their handes;  
And all he wastes with war      there he away rides;  
Their welthes and their wonninges      wandreth he wrought! (3150-57)

[Now Arthur turns, when the time is right, to Tuscany, and he swiftly storms those towns with their lofty towers. He casts down mighty walls, wounds gentle knights, topples towers and torments the people, makes many a splendid widow sing out woe and often sink down weary, weak, and wringing her hands. He wastes all with war,

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credentials; go when you please. / I myself shall assign you lodgings on your way" (Gardner 443-45).

whatever his force rides past, and all their wealth and their dwellings  
he turns to destruction (83).]

The siege of Metz emphasizes the effect of King Arthur's metamorphosis. Arthur had originally gone to war in defiance of demands for tribute from Lucius, to reclaim lost rights and territories, and to rescue the inhabitants of these territories from imperial oppression. Although, in a fourteenth-century context, the siege itself may have been lawful, vivid images of the sufferings of ordinary people begin to accumulate as Arthur's foreign wars continue.

In concert with these images of suffering, the two episodes involving the seizure of hair complete the transformation of Arthur's character. Although his rampage is within the bounds of what is acceptable in medieval warfare, as Arthur increasingly comes to resemble his alter-ego—the tyrant giant—he becomes ever more willing to supersede the spirit of the law. In completing his revenge against Lucius, innocents are caught up in the carnage, littering the landscape like the dead bodies surrounding the giant of Mount Saint Michael. In essence, by the time he defeats Lucius and shaves the beards of his captives, Arthur has joined the company of tyrants he has brought down. His abuse of power reflects an insatiable need to dominate, and the tyranny of the Roman emperor, the giant, and Arthur are impossible to differentiate.

### **Aggression and Shame: Arthur as Parallel and Foil to Richard**

By the time the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* was written, Richard II had repeatedly misused his subjects' property, imprisoned his enemies, and used warfare to display his sovereign power. By 1397, he had truly begun to rule tyrannically in terms of both politics and territory.<sup>21</sup> Driven by the need to control the aristocracy (whom he believed he had reason to mistrust) and to levy taxes to support his army and his court, Richard II increasingly brought into play the sacred nature of the kingship to justify his actions.

According to Nigel Saul, "the association between the Almighty and Richard's kingship was a theme frequently emphasized in the literary and artistic imagery of the court in the later years of the reign" (385). Although the AMA presents a king whose similar vision of kingship reflects Richard II's own vision of regal authority, including the right to seize property as he saw fit (DeMarco 479), it also reflects the tensions caused by this stance rather than justifying it. To demonstrate the contemporary resonance of Arthur's metamorphosis from a diplomatically minded king to a violent aggressor, it is helpful to review widely held opinions of Richard II near the end of his reign.

In his examination of contemporary commentary following the deposition of Richard II in 1399, Christopher Fletcher notes that the king was described at his deposition by the pro-Lancastrian archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel, as

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<sup>21</sup> Nigel Saul, *Richard II*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1997: 366–383.

boyish and unfit to rule; susceptible to flattery; and tending to follow “pleasing appearances” as evidenced by the lavish clothing worn by Richard and his court. Added to this opinion was the contemporary idea that Richard was not “manlich” — or “manly” — in his pursuit of courageous activity. These opinion, combined with his aversion to war and his securing of peace with France in 1396,<sup>22</sup> served to provide — however unfairly — a contemporary view of a king who deliberately deprived his nobles and their knights of their rightful income and due renown.<sup>23</sup>

Further illustrating Richard’s powerlessness were the quarrels between Richard and his nobles, most notably in 1386, when, under threat of deposition, Richard was forced to submit to their demands. In 1387, when three “appellant” nobles, Warwick, Arundel, and Gloucester, took troops to London and accused five of Richard’s closest advisors of treason, Richard again capitulated (although he freed his favorites soon after). Later that year, the king’s troops were defeated at Radcot Bridge, and Richard was again forced to agree to demands by the threat of deposition.

Ten years later, however, England saw a much different Richard II, whose retaliation against his rivals commenced once he had built up his power to the point of tyranny. Because Parliament had reinterpreted interference in the royal household as

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<sup>22</sup> Christopher Fletcher, “Manhood and Politics in the Reign of Richard II.” *Past and Present* 189 (2005): 3-39.

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Tuck, *Crown and Nobility: England 1272–1461* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999): 165-175. Richard’s Scottish campaign in 1385 was hardly decisive, and he signed a 28-year truce with France in 1396 that was unpopular among the English aristocracy, who argued that the prosperity of the knights and esquires of England depended upon war.

treason, Richard was able to have the appellant nobles themselves tried for treason. Warwick was banished, Arundel was executed, and Gloucester died mysteriously in prison, probably on Richard's orders.<sup>24</sup>

The king's ensuing repeal of general pardons put the citizens of southeast England into a position where they could be exploited. Richard sold pardons, failed to record the sales, and sold pardons to the same men (and whole counties). He also had blank charters (which gave him absolute power over the lives and fortunes of the men forced to sign them) drawn, signed, and stored for later use. Richard censored foreign mail and ordered his sheriffs to jail anyone who criticized him, and his taxation policies following the defeat of the Appellants bred fear and mistrust between the king and his subjects.<sup>25</sup> The tension produced by Richard II's cruelty towards the former Appellants and what Saul describes as his growing "detachment from the real—the external—world" (460) is reflected in the tyranny of both the giant and Arthur in the poem.

The giant's lack of honor is exposed in his nonchalance about his crimes of torment, cannibalism, and ravishment, which all observers in the poem, including Arthur, view with outrage. The giant, whose own spoils involved forced tonsure, sees no shame in what he does; had he cared about losing face or inviting ridicule, he would not have committed the crimes that define him as a tormentor who preys on the helpless

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<sup>24</sup> Tuck 185–186.

<sup>25</sup> This tension is addressed thoroughly by Patricia DeMarco in her description of Arthur's/Richard's policies that threaten "to deny the chivalric nobility a means of maintaining their honor" (497).

and innocent. His laziness is borne of total power. There is no bargaining with the monster, as the widow warns Arthur that his beard is the only payment acceptable to the giant, who seeks riches in the solely in the form of kings' beards: "For it is a bootless bale / thou bides ought elles, / For he has more tresure / to take when him likes." [For it's wholly futile to offer him anything else. The monster has more treasure to use as he likes" (29).] The giant has reached the point at which his riches are more signs of power and dominance than economically useful assets.

As Arthur becomes a reflection of the giant who abuses his strength to terrorize the weak, he, too, is intoxicated with power and becomes unconcerned about how his actions are perceived, and the change in Arthur is critical to interpreting his tonsuring of the Roman senators. By humiliating his captives, unnecessary seizing the senators' beards—assets that are more symbolically valuable than the spoils usually associated with victory—King Arthur mirrors Richard II's unpopular manipulation of his own subjects, his insistence on his right to do so, and his scorn for how his people viewed his actions. As with the giant, it is not wealth or property in its purest sense that Arthur seeks; rather it is the power that the gains symbolize—which justifies his ability to ruin towns and populations—and the sheer ability to control and subordinate that characterize Arthur's tyranny.

The notion that one would choose to invite criticism through actions widely perceived as unchivalrous resonates in the depiction of the giant on Mount Saint Michael, of Arthur in his treatment of the Romans, and of Richard at the end of his reign.

All three are belligerent and brutal in their pursuit of power and the acts that symbolize their domination. For the giant and Arthur, the taking of hair represents a form of symbolic tribute and illegally gained wealth, and in their unbridled and unlawful pursuit of property, both Arthur and Richard resemble the giant, who as Heng suggests, “is an autonomous entity whose right to do as he pleases, unmolested, is conferred by the vast capital accumulation accruing from his wrongful transactions” (164). Both are willing to alter the rules of chivalry and England to enrich themselves and believe in their right to do so without censure.

The three figures also preside over their subjects in illegitimate sovereignty: the giant lives outside of any law, as “lord in his owen” (997). Arthur “lodges” in Lorraine as a self-established lord of the land, setting laws as he pleases. Likewise, Richard II punished those who challenged his view of the rights of kingship, and Arthur’s view of a sacred kingship “is cast in terms reminiscent of Richard’s own” (DeMarco 479). Indeed, the epitaph Richard II composed for himself begins, “He threw down whomsoever violated the royal prerogative,” which perhaps epitomized his idea of the wrongfulness of resistance to royal authority.<sup>26</sup>

To a medieval audience, a man’s hair and beard were not only signifiers of masculinity and power, they were the same as a man’s worth and status as a human being. In using such a readily recognizable symbol of unlawful spoils to define the tyrannical Arthur, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* poet recalls the controversial

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<sup>26</sup> Tuck 196.



assessments levied by Richard to expand royal wealth and support his court. Although the charges of Richard II as a tyrant were written by his enemies and may have been largely undeserved (Fletcher 39), they nevertheless reflect contemporary fears of corrupt and unrestrained power.

The actions involving the forced removal of hair provide a conspicuous cross-reference between Arthur and the giant and signal the excesses—both real and presumed—of the real king, whose recklessness toward his nobles and tyranny over his defeated enemies are indistinguishable from the fictional tyrants of the poem.

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## THE RHETORIC OF THE PENNSYLVANIA ANTISLAVERY QUAKERS, 1688–1780

Late in the eighteenth century, the Pennsylvania legislature passed The Gradual Emancipation Act of 1780, the first general antislavery legislation passed in the new republic.<sup>1</sup> This legislation, which was based on the idea of gradual manumission, followed nearly ninety years of efforts, begun in 1688 by a group of Pennsylvania Quakers, to effect immediate abolition of slavery. It came more than twenty years after the Pennsylvania Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends voted in 1758 to condemn slaveholding by Friends in Pennsylvania.

The campaign to end slavery began with the earliest known American Quaker petition to end slavery, issued by Quakers in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1688. The arguments included in that appeal—titled “Reasons Why We Are Against the Traffic of Menbody” and signed by four members of the Germantown Monthly Meeting—established an antislavery rhetoric that would not alter substantially for the next seventy years.

Some observers, including historian Richard S. Newman, have termed the approach presented by the Pennsylvania Quakers as “gradualist.” In *The Transformation*

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<sup>1</sup> The bill emancipated all Negro children born in the future but required them to serve their mothers’ masters. These children would be entitled to all the privileges of indentured servants, and the girls would be unconditionally free at eighteen, whereas the boys would serve until they were twenty-one (Zilversmidt 127). Although the abolition bill of 1780 warrants notice as the first passed in America, the law freed not a single slave.

of *American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic*, Newman writes that, by the 1830s, “the early struggle against slavery (described variously as ‘gradualist’ and ‘Quaker-oriented’) had long since died out.”<sup>2</sup> What is puzzling about this statement is that—aside from early writings by English Quaker leader George Fox and Pennsylvania Quaker Robert Pyle, both of whom suggest limiting Negro servitude to a term of years (Drake 21)—there is little evidence that the Quakers in Pennsylvania ever advocated the gradual freeing of slaves.

In fact, Quaker antislavery rhetoric that began with the *Petition of the Germantown Quakers* in 1688 and continued for the next ninety years invariably calls for “enlargement”—or immediate emancipation. It was not until well into the eighteenth century that an emancipation model involving gradual or staged manumission began to emerge in the arguments published by Pennsylvania Quakers.

This paper examines the rhetorical devices used consistently by the Pennsylvania abolitionists and argues that the concept of gradual emancipation associated with the Quaker abolitionists is more appropriately ascribed to the official responses by the various Quaker officials to whom the antislavery appeals were directed during the

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<sup>2</sup> Newman, Richard S., *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2002) 1. Other references to the “gradualist” approach by the Quakers appear in Thomas E. Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1950) 45; Jean Soderland, *Quakers & Slavery: A Divided Spirit*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) 119; and David Brion Davis, “The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Antislavery Thought,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 49 (1962): 210.

period covered (and thereafter).<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence that individual Pennsylvania Quakers ever argued for what Gary Nash and Jean Soderland have termed “freedom by degrees.”<sup>4</sup> But by impeding the efforts of members who appealed for “immediatism,” the various conservative Quaker assemblies<sup>5</sup> in Pennsylvania so slowed the progress of emancipation that the perception of gradual emancipation began to symbolize the movement.

It was not until 1758 that the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting officially agreed to exclude Friends who bought or sold slaves from meetings and to refuse their

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<sup>3</sup> One explanation for the modern use of the term “gradualism” to define all Quaker appeal for abolition is the Society for the Amelioration and Gradual Abolition of Slavery that was formed by Quakers in England the nineteenth century (1823–1839) and was more generally known as the Anti-Slavery Society. Under the leadership of Thomas Fowell Buxton, its policy was, as its full title indicates, essentially gradualist, the assumption being that by demanding too much all at once the Society of Friends would alienate Parliament. MSN Encarta, 21 October 2006 <[http://uk.encarta.msn.com/text\\_761570452\\_\\_\\_4/Abolition\\_Movement.html](http://uk.encarta.msn.com/text_761570452___4/Abolition_Movement.html)>.

<sup>4</sup> This is a term the authors assign to the entire process of abolition of slavery in Pennsylvania, which involved Quakers as well as secular figures.

<sup>5</sup> *Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices*, Ed. J. Gordon Melton and Martin Baumann (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2002) 243. Quaker Meetings were categorized as follows: The Weekly Meeting was primarily devoted to worship and was the basic unit of Quaker Fellowship. Monthly Meetings were made up of the members of the Weekly Meetings within a specific, contiguous area and certified the eligibility of members within the district for membership in the Society. Several Monthly Meetings were combined to form a Quarterly Meeting, and Quarterly Meetings were in turn combined to form a Yearly Meeting that served all the subsidiary meetings in a wide geographic area, providing advice and assistance on weighty matters of principle and practice. For purposes of this essay, the terms “Society” and “Friends” are interchangeable when referring to the Quaker meetings to which the abolitionists’ appeals were made.

contributions as “tainted money.”<sup>6</sup> Even that declaration failed to bring about an immediate end to slaveholding among Quakers or to induce legislation in Pennsylvania until after the Revolutionary War. Ultimately the immediate emancipation consistently called for by the abolitionists was rendered unattainable, and only the doctrine of gradual emancipation proved effective in gaining any sort of legislative action.

### **The First Wave of Quaker Abolition Writing: 1688 through 1738**

The century-long antislavery efforts of the Pennsylvania Quakers began with what is widely accepted as the first antislavery tract published in colonial America, the *Petition of the Germantown Quakers* (1688). The Germantown treatise was set aside by the yearly meetings of Friends in Philadelphia as being “a thing of too great weight for this meeting to determine” (Nash and Soderland 43).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the Germantown protest established the fundamental rhetoric of Quaker objections to slavery for the next ninety years. Appealing to the Friends’ basic doctrines including the Golden Rule, avoidance of theft and sloth, and living within Christian law, the tract demands release of all slaves owned by Pennsylvania Quakers:

And such men ought to be delivered out of ye hands of ye robbers, and set free as well as in Europe. Then is Pennsylvania to have a good

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<sup>6</sup> Gary B. Nash, “Slaves and Slaveowners in Colonial Philadelphia,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 30 (1973): 252.

<sup>7</sup> Henry J. Cadbury also provides a limited explanation of why the petition was dismissed, just that it was: “While we know from minutes of superior meetings how the Germantown petition of 1688 was rejected or ignored, we have no record of action on the paper,” from “An Early Quaker Anti-Slavery Statement,” *Journal of Negro History*, 22 (1937): 491.

report, instead it hath now a bad one for this sake in other countries. Especially whereas ye Europeans are desirous to know in what manner ye Quakers doe rule in their province; and most of them doe look upon us with an envious eye. But if this is done well, what shall we say is done evil?<sup>8</sup>

The Germantown petition, widely believed to be first formal protest by white colonists against the practice of slavery in the Americas, was just the first of such appeals to be answered by Meeting officials with procrastination instead of action.

To understand the difficulties the early Pennsylvania Quaker reformers were to face over the next forty years, it is important to note two aspects of slavery in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Pennsylvania. First, although Friends in both England and the colonies (including Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York) had questioned the morality of slavery since the 1680s, such sentiments “fell on deaf ears: Quakers who settled in Philadelphia and rural Pennsylvania showed little compunction about drafting Africans to do their work” (Nash and Soderland 11). Quakers held slaves, and many did not intend to give them up.<sup>9</sup> Second, the reluctance on the part of the Quaker meetings to condemn slavery was echoed by the Pennsylvania colonial legislature. The Pennsylvania Assembly was primarily controlled by the Quaker elite in Philadelphia, where according to Gary Nash, as late as 1724, “the greater prevalence of

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<sup>8</sup> David Francis Pastorius, *Petition of the Germantown Quakers, Early American Writings*, Ed. Carla Mulford (New York: Oxford UP, 2002) 727.

<sup>9</sup> Soderland notes that, between 1681 and 1750, two thirds of the members of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting held slaves. It was not until the late 1740s and early 1750s that the older slaveholding leaders gradually gave way to non-slaveholders (52).



slave owning, despite efforts by the Society of Friends to limit the importation of Negroes, is evidence of the more aristocratic tenor of life among the leading representatives of the Philadelphia society” (323). In early eighteenth-century Pennsylvania, especially in Philadelphia, Quakers lived opulently, flouting the Quaker dictate of simplicity and looking more like upper-class Englishmen. It is little wonder that emancipation appeals by the early abolitionists to both the Society and the colonial legislature were frustrated, and until the last half of the eighteenth century, very little progress was made.

One of the earliest individuals to call for the emancipation of slaves was George Keith, the controversial leader of a schismatic group of Quakers, whose followers issued in 1693—five years after the Germantown protest—*An Exhortation and Caution to Friends Concerning Buying or Keeping of Negroes* (Kirby 89). Reminding readers again of the Golden Rule and the commands of God, Keith proposes that all Quaker slaveholders set free their slaves:

Therefore in true Christian Love, we earnestly recommend it to all our Friends and Brethren, Not to buy any Negroes, unless it were on purpose to set them free, and that such who have bought any, and have them at present, after some reasonable time of moderate Service they have had of them, or may have of them, that may reasonably answer to the charge of what they have laid out, especially in keeping Negroes.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> George Keith, *An Exhortation and Caution to Friends Concerning Buying or Keeping of Negroes*, 1693, *Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans*, UNCG, Greensboro, NC, 22 October, 2006 <<http://libproxy.uncg.edu>>.

Although Keith and his followers were schismatics who could be largely ignored by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, their continued efforts succeeded in convincing the Meeting to issue its first statement, however cautious, “relating to the keeping and bringing in of Negroes ... [advising] Friends to be careful not to encourage the bringing in of any more negroes and to take care of the religious needs of those they owned” (qtd. in Zilversmidt 57).

Keith grew relatively quiet on the issue after the turn of the century, when his contemporary William Southeby, a prominent minister in Philadelphia, took up the cause. From the late 1600s until 1716, Southeby vigorously pursued his arguments before both the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and the colonial legislature, but to little avail.<sup>11</sup> In 1712, his personal entreaty to the Pennsylvania Assembly to abolish slavery altogether was met with the resolution that it was “neither just nor convenient to set them [the Negroes] at liberty” (Drake 28). In his growing frustration, Southeby would take drastic action, and like his successors, he would soon fall victim to the wrath of the Quaker conservatives. Daring to challenge the Quaker leadership in Philadelphia, Southeby published a treatise denouncing both slaveholding and the Quakers who

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<sup>11</sup> In spite of repeated petitions on the part of both Southeby and Robert Pyle (a prominent member of the Concord Monthly Meeting near Philadelphia) to both Society and colonial powers, the Quaker legislature’s “Black Code” of 1700 sanctioned the custom of “keeping them for a term of life” (Drake 21).

upheld it. According to Arthur Zilversmidt, Southeby defied the Meeting by publishing the antislavery tract without permission—“a serious offense against the Discipline of the Society, for Friends brooked no publication by their members without the approval of those in authority” (64). Southeby was censured, and although he apologized to the Meeting (postponing disownment<sup>12</sup> by the Meeting), he soon published a second abolitionist tract without Quaker permission. Again threatened with disownment, Southeby backed down.<sup>13</sup>

With Southeby effectively silenced in 1718, it would be more than ten years before the Society would again be bothered by an antislavery appeal. In 1729, Ralph Sandiford, a Quaker immigrant from England, became so “overwhelmed with shame” by the slave trade in Philadelphia that in 1729 he, too, published an antislavery tract—*A Brief Examination of the Practice of the Times*—without Society sanction (Drake 39). Printed

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<sup>12</sup> When a member of the Society of Friends acted in a manner contrary to discipline, that member was visited by a committee appointed by the meeting. If the member failed to acknowledge fault after visitation by the committee, then the member was disowned by the Society and could not be reinstated until acknowledgement of fault was made. Rootsweb.com, 11 October 2006, <<http://www.rootsweb.com/~quakers/quakdefs.htm>>.

<sup>13</sup> Both Drake and Zilversmidt comment that it is unknown whether Southeby was actually disowned, but according to Drake, Southeby’s public attacks had so angered his “conservative fellow Quakers [that] they held onto their slaves more firmly than ever” (29). Quaker.org shows that among Disciplinary Cases in Pennsylvania Monthly Meetings from 1682–1776, seven involved “printing.” *The Religious Society of Friends* 24 April 2003 <<http://www.quaker.org/disown.html>>.

by Benjamin Franklin,<sup>14</sup> Sandiford's tract reopened the slavery controversy in Philadelphia, outraging the conservative Quakers, who banished him from the meeting—an action that his friends believed led to his death in 1733 (Drake 41–43).

In the autumn of 1738, a small, hunchbacked Quaker abolitionist, Benjamin Lay, astounded the pacifist Quakers attending that year's Yearly Meeting in Burlington, New Jersey, by arriving clad in a plain overcoat that covered a full military costume, complete with a sword. Saying to the assembly, "Oh all you Negro masters who are contentedly holding your fellow creatures in a state of slavery, you might as well throw off the plain coat as I do," Lay threw off his coat and then ran his sword through a hollowed-out Bible that contained a bladder of red juice, symbolizing blood (Soderland 16).

Lay is noted for his spectacular antislavery performances, which were well-known to the Quakers in Philadelphia. A staunch abolitionist since a brief stay in Barbados in the 1730s, the misshapen Lay lived in a cave outside Philadelphia and had almost no possessions. In addition to his "bladder of blood" display in 1738, he "kidnapped a Quaker child to illustrate the grief suffered by African families when their children were stolen ... and stood with one bare foot in deep snow to publicize the ill-treatment suffered by blacks, especially in winter" (Soderland 16). A year earlier, he convinced Franklin to publish another antislavery tract condemning Quaker slaveholders, and—like Southeby and Sandiford—he did it without Society permission

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<sup>14</sup> Drake notes that Franklin "took care to see that the printer's name did not appear on the title page" (39); it would be many years before Franklin's tenure on the Philadelphia Abolition Society began.

(even though it is unlikely that his 278-page manuscript would have been approved by the conservative Philadelphia Meeting in *any* form). Featuring a title that is so lengthy, it is almost a treatise in itself,<sup>15</sup> Lay's *All Slave-Keepers That Keep the Innocent in Bondage* is a rambling book that openly denounces all slaveholders within the Society of Friends. He incorporates previous abolitionist entreaties to obey the Golden Rule, to remember the suffering of the Negro slave, and to follow God's rules. He recounts his stay in Barbados, providing lurid details of the suffering of the slaves there, and quotes both Ralph Sandiford and John Milton. But he dares to go further by condemning the Quaker ministry who held slaves:

Now Dear Friends, behold a Mystery! These Ministers that be Slave-keepers, and in such very great repute, such eminent preachers, given to Hospitality, charitable to the Poor, loving to their neighbors, just in their Dealings ... very religious seemingly, and extraordinary devout and demure, and in short strictly exact in all their Decorums, except Slave-keeping, these, these be the men, and the Women to, for the Devil's purpose, and are the choicest Treasure the Devil can or has to bring out of his Lazaretto, to establish Slave-keeping. (29)

The Society found Lay's book offensive enough to take action against him. Together with his outrageous public acts, the tract represented "an effrontery [the] Philadelphia Friends could not tolerate ... [and] they decided in 1738 to disown Lay publicly as they had already done in private" (Drake 48).

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<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Lay, *All Slave-Keepers that Keep the Innocent in Bondage*, 1693, *Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans*, UNCG, Greensboro, NC, 22 October, 2006 <<http://libproxy.uncg.edu>>.

Coming at the end of what can be termed the “first wave” of Pennsylvania Quaker abolitionists, Lay’s condemnations and public antics did little to sway the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1738. According to Soderland, however, Lay “probably helped to encourage the budding opponents to slavery who would gain support and take control of the Yearly Meeting fifteen years later” (Nash 15). By the middle of the eighteenth century, attempts to move the Quaker community toward a definitive ban on slavery had been met for the most part by delay, equivocation, and chastisement. Nevertheless, as slaveholders in both the Society and the Pennsylvania legislature were replaced mid-century by men who either found it economically unnecessary or morally abhorrent to own slaves, the struggle faced by reformers was about to change.

### **The Rhetoric of the Emancipation Argument**

From the antislavery appeal in Germantown to the writings of the eccentric Benjamin Lay, the Pennsylvania Quaker abolitionists exhibit a remarkably unwavering rhetoric that reflects six basic arguments. These appeals are consistent throughout the ninety years of efforts toward abolition of slavery among Friends, and none involves the concept of gradual emancipation.

The first principal set forth is that slavery and slaveholding violate the basic tenets of Quakerism. This recurring argument by antislavery Quakers in the later part of the eighteenth century—from the Germantown protest through the writings of John Woolman (a New Jersey native who had settled in Pennsylvania) and Anthony Benezet (who had come to Pennsylvania to avoid religious persecution in France)—reminds the

reader that slaveholding violates Quaker dicta. According to both early and later writers, the traffic in slaves goes against the Quaker tenets of pacifism and nonviolence, the discouragement of ostentation and sloth, and the prohibition against stolen goods.

The caution against trafficking appears consistently in the treatises. In the Germantown protest, Pastorius writes, "And we who profess that it is not lawful to steal, must likewise, avoid to purchase such things that are stolen" (727). Keith, writing in 1693, cautions readers to bear in mind that because Quakerism is averse to buying "Prize or Stollen Goods," Quakers must not purchase them "to the scandal of the Christian Profession" (3). Ralph Sandiford suggests in 1730 that it is against Quaker beliefs "to take a man from his native country. . . and that stealth . . . whereby thou receivest the theft, which is as bad" and "if there were no buyers, there would be no sellers; was the cause removed the effect would cease" (13).

One of the most vigorous in reminding slave-owning Friends of their duplicity was Benjamin Lay. In his 1737 *All Slave-keepers*, he does not compromise:

We pretend not to love fighting with carnal Weapons, nor to carry Swords by our sides, but carry a worse thing in the Heart. What . . . can be greater Hypocrisy and plainer contradiction, than for us as a People to refuse to bear arms, or to pay them that do,<sup>16</sup> and yet purchase the Plunder, the Captives, for Slaves . . . thereby justifying their selling of them and the War, by which they are obtained." (10–11).

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<sup>16</sup> This is a reference to the Quakers' refusal to support any type of armed militia.

Lay accuses the slaveholders of sloth, writing that “Long Custom, the Convenience of Slaves working for us, waiting and tending continually on us ... and the proud, dainty, lazy daughters sit with their hands before ’em ... and if they want a trifle, rather than rise from their Seats, call the poor Slave from her Drudgery to come and wait upon them. These Things have been the utter Ruin of more than a few” (28–29).

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Quakers had been punished in England and ostracized throughout the Colonies because of their beliefs. By reminding Quaker brethren that slaveholding violated the most basic tenets of the Society of Friends, the abolitionist argument effectively tied the keeping of slaves to abandonment of any progress Quakers had made in defending their social directives before non-Quakers.

A second principle used consistently in the abolitionist appeals is that slavery is an unchristian practice that is abhorrent to God and condemned by the Bible. Although the reformers of the later eighteenth century by no means abandon Christian dicta as an antislavery argument, reliance on the Bible to support their appeals especially characterizes the earlier writings. The tracts by Keith, Southeby, Sandiford, and Lay quote the Bible extensively, repeatedly reminding Friends of the Quaker tenet “that all people are equal in the sight of God and capable of receiving God’s Light” (Soderland 17). Keith argues that “our Lord Jesus Christ hath tasted Death for every Man ... and Negroes, Blacks, and Taunies are a real part of Mankind, for whom Christ hath shed his



precious Blood, and are capable of Salvation, as well as White Men" (1). Lay fortifies his argument by using quotations from the Bible throughout *All Slave-keepers*, frequently to dispute proslavery arguments that use the Bible to defend the institution.<sup>17</sup> Although this focus on the teachings of Christ and other lessons from the Bible is consistent in abolitionist arguments through the eighteenth century (and ultimately until the end of the Civil War), a more secular appeal ultimately prevailed among Quakers by the middle of the eighteenth century, when arguments begin to reflect the sentiments of the Revolution.

A third argument proposes that slavery is a moral abomination that imperils both the slave and the slaveholder. The Germantown protest notes, "there is a saying, that we should do to all men as we will be done ourselves; making no difference of what generation, descent or colour they are" (Pastorius 727). This sentiment is echoed by Southeby's contemporary, John Hepburn, whose *American Defence of the Christian Golden Rule* denounces slavery as a "vile contradiction to the Gospel of the blessed Messiah" and [tells] his brethren that they risk damnation by continuing in this Antichristian practice.<sup>18</sup> Quaker Robert Pyle, in his early epistle to the Concord Monthly Meeting in

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<sup>17</sup> Through the use of Biblical passages, Lay compares Quaker slaveowners to devils: "Be these Christians, and Ministers, too that encourage and plead for these things? It must be all a Lie, and that is of the Devil, *for when he speaketh a Lie, it is of himself.* Joh. viii.44" (40). Later he writes, "Do these *adorn the Doctrine of God our Saviour* with Slave-keeping. I think in my very Soul, it is more agreeable to the Devil" (43).

<sup>18</sup> John Hepburn, *The American Defence of the Christian Golden Rule, or an Essay to Prove the Unlawfulness of Making Slaves of Men. By Him Who Loves The Freedom Of The Souls And Bodies Of All*

Chester County, encourages Friends to “Doe unto all men as ye would have all men doe unto you” (qtd. in Nash and Soderland 45).

Adding to the reminder to keep the Golden Rule, the abolitionists warn Friends that slavery not only breaks the rule, but by denying slaves the right to live as families, the institution inevitably promotes adultery: “And we know that men must not commit adultery—some do commit adultery *in* others, separating wives from their husbands, and giving them to others (Pastorius 727). It also increases the risk of miscegenation, as Philadelphian Cadwalader Morgan imagines in 1696: “What if, during his master’s absence from him, the slave should desire to look to commit wickedness with a woman or maid?” (qtd. in Drake 19).<sup>19</sup> This view of slavery in the rigid light of the Golden Rule and as a deed that made the slaveholder complicit in sexual misconduct made Negro bondage not just a social or economic practice, but the embodiment of worldly sin. For the abolitionists, immediate manumission became a matter of moral exigency, and not one that could wait while the institution was gradually cast aside.

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*Men, 1715, Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans*, UNCG, Greensboro, NC, 22 November 2006 <<http://libproxy.uncg.edu>>: 1.

<sup>19</sup> Edgar McManus notes that in 1726, the Quaker-controlled Pennsylvania legislature passed stringent laws against miscegenation. It provided that free blacks guilty of sexual relations with whites were to be sold as servants for seven years. Any Negro who married a white person was to be sold as a slave “during life,” and the minister or magistrate who performed the marriage was to be punished by a £100 fine (85).

Almost universally, the Quaker abolitionists seek to persuade their audience by listing in dreadful detail the physical and psychological abuses endured by slaves. Beginning with the appeal by the Germantown Quakers, who suggest that “the Quakers do here handel men as they handel there the cattle” (Pastorius 727), to the highly graphic writings of Anthony Benezet in the 1750s, the antislavery writers remind their readers of the cruelty of slaveowners and the horrifying conditions under which slaves live. Ralph Sandiford in particular was sickened by the public slave auctions he witnessed in Philadelphia, and he expresses his disbelief that “the eternal love of the Father should allow his followers in the most arbitrary and tyrannical oppression that hell has invented on this globe” (qtd. in Drake 42).

Lay—who actually kidnapped a Quaker child to make a point about slavery—asks his readers to imagine the horrors of being separated from their loved ones, as slaves have endured “in Philadelphia, and elsewhere in America ... but what crying, wringing of hands, what Mourning and Lamentations there was then by their Relations, Wives for their Husbands, Parents for their Children, Relations for their Friends, one Neighbour for another!” (15). Benezet was perhaps the most persistent in presenting the hardships for the slave in America, as he restates Lay’s depiction of families’ being separated:

Let any consider what it is to lose a Child, a Husband or any dear Relation, and then let them say what they must think of those who are engaged in, or encourage such a Trade. By the fore mentioned Accounts it appears, how by various perfidious, and cruel Methods, the unhappy Negroes are

inlaved ... violently rent from the tenderest Ties of Nature, to toil in hard Labour ... under hard Taskmasters, and this mostly to uphold the Luxury and Covetousness of proud selfish Men, without any Hope of ever seeing again their native Land, or an end to their Miseries. (*Observations* 8)

Benezet strengthens his depiction of the grief suffered by slaves by pointing out that, by making the slaveholder lazy, slavery goes against the inherent Quaker belief that sloth and ostentation must be avoided.

This appeal for empathy for the slave was used most strenuously by the abolitionist writers who had personally witnessed brutal treatment of slaves in the West Indies. Lay had visited Barbados and attested to the cruel treatment there, and later Woolman and Benezet traveled there to see first-hand the conditions under which slaves existed. Although their abolitionist tracts apply what they learned to domestic treatment, as well, the images of the West Indies slave are most vivid.

Reflecting the general fear of slave revolt, especially in light of uprisings throughout the West Indies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Quaker antislavery messages warned of the inevitable, disastrous consequences for slaveholders. The Germantown protest warns, "If once these slaves (which they say are so wicked and stubborn men) should join themselves—fight for their freedom, and handel their masters and mistresses, as they did handel them before ... have these poor negers not as much right to fight for their freedom, as you have to keep them as slaves?" (Pastorius 727). Although the fear of slaves turning on their masters is not reflected in

official statements issued after the 1750s by the Society of Friends, Benezet's pamphlet, *A Caution and Warning to Great Britain on the Calamitous State of the Enslaved Negro*, warns of the tragic consequences that would follow a slave rebellion, a theme that would have resonated in the colonies by then, as uprisings in New York (1712) and in the southern colonies (1740s) had brought the West Indian rebellions much closer to home.

A final argument made by the abolitionists reminded Quakers that slavery sends a message to the rest of the world about the character of slaveholders. From the Germantown protest to the writings of Benjamin Lay in the 1730s, the early abolitionist writers caution that the world will disapprove of Pennsylvanians who perpetuate slavery, especially Quakers: "Then [after slaves have been freed] is Pennsylvania to have a good report, instead it hath now a bad one for this sake in other Countries" (Pastorius 727). Pastorius points out that "other nations have already judged and written their 'report' of the situation in Pennsylvania, while the Quakers refuse to evaluate the issue of slavery according to their own moral standards" (qtd. in Erben 171). Writing more than eighty years later, Philadelphia abolitionist Benjamin Rush repeats this caution: "Remember the eyes of all Europe are fixed upon you, to preserve an asylum for freedom in this country" (Rush 18).

Keith warns the merchants who have grown rich through slave labor that "those Riches which they have heaped together, through the cruel Oppression of these miserable Creatures, will be a means to draw God's judgment upon them" (Kirby 89). In

1698, Pyle cautions the Concord Monthly Meeting of the danger of slave uprisings, stating the fear that blacks “might rise in rebellion and doe us much mischief; except we keep a malisha; which is against our principles” (qtd. in Nash and Soderland 45).

When the Seven Years’ War began in 1754, abolitionists including John Woolman interpreted the violence on the Pennsylvania border as God’s punishment for their failure to adhere to Quaker Code. Woolman suggests “it may be that by terrible things in righteousness God may answer us in this matter.”<sup>20</sup> He reminds readers of the degradations risked by slaveholders: “Where slavekeeping prevails, pure religion and sobriety decline, as it evidently tends to harden the heart and render the soul less susceptible of that holy spirit of love, meakness and charity” (37). Benezet notes that slavery “introduces idleness, discourages Marriage, corrupts the Youth and ruins and debauches Morals ... the true Motive of encouraging the Trade is selfish Avarice” (*Observations* 7).

Although Woolman and Benezet continued to focus on the moral objections raised by the earlier writers, they began to supplement their arguments with application of the natural rights philosophy associated with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. In 1688, Pastorius had pointed out that Negroes were “brought hither against their will,” but until the writings of the later Quaker abolitionists, the concept of liberty as a natural right had not been a part of the antislavery tracts.

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<sup>20</sup> Woolman, John., *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes, 1754, Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans*. UNCG, Greensboro, NC, 22 October 2006 <<http://libproxy.uncg.edu>> 21.

The arguments for the natural rights of slaves and the condemnation by God and other countries of the hypocrisy of the American slaveholders coincided with a general decline in slaveholding Quakers by the mid-eighteenth century, enabling the cause of the Quaker abolitionists to gain firmer footing than ever before. Still, until the Quakers officially imposed sanctions against slaveholders in 1758, opposition to the abolitionists' arguments from within the Pennsylvania Society of Friends was as consistently structured as the most ardent antislavery entreaties.

#### **Response from the Pennsylvania Society of Friends: 1688–1758**

In spite of the consistent appeals by reformers, the Society of Friends refused to take definitive action against slaveholding, instead disowning (or threatening to disown) its members who most vocally—and worse, publicly—condemned Quakers for continuing to hold slaves. Between the 1690s and 1719, efforts to convince Quakers to abandon the practice of slavery would receive the same Society response given to the Germantown protest, as local and state meetings repeatedly concluded that the subject was simply beyond their jurisdiction. Nash and Soderland suggest that—at least during the first period of protest—“the majority of Friends doubted that slavekeeping was even wrong ... Quakers bought slaves because they needed the labor and believed they could avoid offending God as long as they treated their slaves well” (43).

The Society's resistance to change consistently focused on economics and property rights. Nash and Soderland again suggest that early Pennsylvania Friends, like

other American colonists in general, “believed that their own labor needs and property rights took precedence over any right of Africans to be free” (49). Furthermore, as Soderland explains, although the Friends may have agreed that all people, including slaves, were entitled to salvation, they probably did not believe all humans were entitled to be equal socially, politically, and economically. Moreover, they feared that freed slaves would be a burden to the communities that assimilated them (18). Until the middle of the eighteenth century, many Quakers continued to hold slaves,<sup>21</sup> and although the Society for decades issued moral and religious *guidelines* calling for the kind treatment of slaves, any real decision would take many more years, as the Society—reflecting the very slaveholding patterns among its members—only gradually adopted any sort of meaningful instructions.

In the seventy years between 1688 and 1758, the Society successfully evaded the issue of slaveholding by Friends, as is evident from its restrained statement in 1696 that “Friends be careful not to encourage the business of importing any more Negroes,” (addressing importation only and skirting the subject slaveholding). The Quaker Black Code of 1700 sanctioned the custom of “keeping them [Negro slaves] term of life,” and the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting issued a guarded statement in 1730 that “Friends ought to be very cautious of [purchasing Negroes], it being disagreeable to the sense of this Meeting” (Drake 25)—a rebuke to purchasers, not owners.

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<sup>21</sup> Soderland and Nash show that the recorded slave population of Pennsylvania grew steadily until 1782, when it peaked at 6,855. By 1790, it had declined by nearly half. (5)



In spite of decades of appeals for manumission, the customary response from Quaker officials was simply to conduct frequent polls of its members through “queries,” to determine which Friends continued to purchase and hold slaves, but to avoid prescribing disciplinary measures against those who continued to purchase imported slaves. In separate analyses, Jean Soderland and Gary Nash explain why Quakers persisted to trade in slaves even after official Society doctrine condemned it in 1758. Soderland describes the practice in Pennsylvania of turning to slave labor in the 1750s and 1760s, when the Seven Years’ War stemmed the influx of European immigrants who served as servants.<sup>22</sup> Nash supports this argument, noting that during the period from 1755 to 1774, “confirmation of extensive involvement by Friends in slavekeeping can be found in Quaker documents themselves.”<sup>23</sup> It was not until 1764, by which time white bound labor had returned to pre-war levels, that Quakers stopped buying slaves, and not until the “eve of the American Revolution was the ideological commitment of the Quaker leadership able to prevail over the membership at large in the matter of manumission” (Nash, “Slaves and Slaveholders, 54).

### **Expanding the Antislavery Argument: 1753 to 1780**

In the 1750s, recognizing a mounting discomfort about slavery throughout the Quaker population, Pennsylvania Quaker abolitionists not only added the ideology of

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<sup>22</sup> Jean Soderland, “Slaves and Slaveowners in Philadelphia,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 133 (1989): 146.

<sup>23</sup> Gary B. Nash, “Slaves and Slaveowners in Colonial Philadelphia,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 30 (1973): 253–54.

the Enlightenment and the American Revolution to the earlier abolitionist arguments, but it also enlisted the support of public figures outside the Quaker Society to extend support for their pleas to the general population.

Until 1753, the Quaker meetings in Pennsylvania maintained the 1730 stance of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting to simply “admonish” members who *bought* imported slaves. According to Soderland, the first signal that the Philadelphia Yearly meeting would alter its decades-long direction on slavery was the approval that year of John Woolman’s essay *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* (26). Nash and Soderland note that “Woolman had written his tract seven years earlier, but knew that he could not get permission to publish it from the hostile overseers of the [Quaker] press, because in 1746, fully two thirds of that body [the Society of Friends in Pennsylvania] owned slaves” (51). By 1753, the membership of the committee had changed enough (through the death of several slaveholding censors) that Woolman submitted his argument for review. It was accepted in 1754 (Soderland 27).

In his tracts after 1754,<sup>24</sup> Woolman echoes the arguments used by earlier antislavery Quaker writers, but he avoids attacking the slaveholders directly. Instead, he entreats Friends to work for the general improvement of society. Soderland suggests that the effect of this change in rhetoric cannot be overestimated: “The next year, Friends

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<sup>24</sup> These include *Considerations on Keeping Negroes; Recommended to the Professors of Christianity, of Every Denomination, Part Second* (1762); *Considerations on Pure Wisdom, and Human Policy; on Labour; on Schools, and on the Right Use of The Lord’s Outward Gifts* (1768); and *Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind; and How it is to Be Maintained* (1770).

published their own antislavery tract, one that ... for the first time suggested to its members that slaveholding *itself*, and not just importation was an un-Christian act" (27).

Although now becoming more effective because of broader acceptance within the Society of Friends, the arguments in Woolman's sanctioned treatise are essentially the same as those used by reformers over the previous sixty-five years: he expresses regret over recent increases in slavery among Friends, encourages members to live by the Golden Rule and remember that blacks were enslaved through theft and war, and warns masters to weigh the consequences of detaining slaves for personal gain (Soderland 27). Even so, the Friends' 1754 decision did not go far enough for the abolitionists. It failed to specify what means, if any, should be used to punish Friends who continued to import or buy slaves. Recognizing the need for further clarification, the 1758 Philadelphia Meeting resolved "that the Society should take any step within its power to stop the current increase in buying, selling, and keeping slaves" (qtd. in Soderland 30), requiring that all Pennsylvania Monthly Meetings place under discipline Friends who imported, bought, or sold slaves.

Clearly, Benezet and Woolman faced an entirely different political and economic landscape from that encountered by their predecessors. According to Nash and Soderland, "[They] were able to hitch their campaign to ban slave-owning among Friends to the more general reform movement" emerging in Pennsylvania in the 1750s (51). The publishing of Woolman's tracts and the actions by the Quaker Yearly Meeting

in 1758 enabled the writings and pamphlets of Woolman and Benezet to be read by an audience that increasingly included both Quakers and non-Quakers in Pennsylvania.

According to Dwight Dumond, although Benezet wrote far less than Woolman, he worked closely with prominent abolitionists in England, including Granville Sharp, and such well-known Philadelphians as the prominent physician Benjamin Rush to publicize his arguments (18). Importantly, these later writers were able to incorporate the emerging rhetoric of the American Revolution, giving their case even more substance. This critical broadening of the abolitionist rhetoric added both economic arguments and—as the country moved closer to war with England—new themes related to natural rights. Echoing the arguments of the early abolitionists, Woolman suggests that war is God’s punishment for the Friends’ worldliness and sins, but his argument before the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1753 also reminds his fellow Quaker readers that private interests no longer “stand on an immutable foundation” (Nash and Soderland 53).

Calling for civil liberty as others called for political liberty, the later abolitionists took full advantage of growing revolutionary sentiment, and their arguments began to reflect the rhetoric of the times. According to Patricia Bradley, “this group sought to place antislavery in an emerging American ideology” (97). By the 1770s, the dominant antislavery rhetoric—in addition to incorporating the previously consistent characteristics including the Golden Rule and the displeasure of God—began to include new themes including natural law as expressed by John Locke, the idea of American

guilt for the continuation of slavery, and the claim of African innocence. In his *Brief Considerations on Slavery*, Benezet asks how a “nation which has so eminently distinguished itself in asserting the common rights of mankind” could continue to subject “the Africans” to “the most abject state of perpetual personal slavery” (3, 8).

However reflective the abolitionists’ argument had become of the times, their doctrine of pacifism made them increasingly unpopular—especially in Philadelphia. By the 1770s, their ability to publicize their cause had been considerably weakened (Nash and Soderland 78). The approaching war nevertheless served some purpose for the reformers, as abolitionists in England and in Pennsylvania began to discuss the hypocrisy of protesting tyrannical British policies while enslaving hundreds of thousands of Africans. The argument provided legitimacy to the Quaker voice and attracted new writers (including Thomas Paine) into the campaign. Nash and Soderland note that, by 1772, in spite of the unpopularity of Quaker pacifism, their antislavery argument gained strength, perhaps most notably through the collaboration of Benezet and his influential ally, Philadelphian Dr. Benjamin Rush (77).<sup>25</sup>

In 1772, at the urging of Benezet, Rush wrote *An Address to the Inhabitants of the British Settlements in America Upon Slave-Keeping*, which was “a major statement that for the first time brought the many threads of the [antislavery] discussion into an American

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<sup>25</sup> Benjamin Rush, although a Presbyterian, was the son of a Philadelphia Quaker. His writings are included here for a number of reasons, including his collaboration with Benezet, his effective use of existing Quaker rhetoric in combination emerging ideas, and his influence in Philadelphia.

context” (Bradley 111). The essay, which Bradley considers “the antislavery pamphlet of the colonial period that most approached the stature of Sewell’s *The Selling of Joseph*” (110), includes the—by then—well-known rhetoric of the abolitionist Quakers: free men were much more economically productive than slave labor and there could be no just war when Africans had been stolen. Rush’s tract also presents the usual depictions of slave mistreatment: “See here one without a limb, his only crime to regain his Liberty—another led to a Gallows for eating a morsel of bread ... a fourth, in a flame of Fire!—his shrieks pierce the very heavens—O! God! Where is thy vengeance! O! Humanity—Justice—Liberty—Religion!—Where—where are ye fled?”<sup>26</sup> Adding to the usual Quaker argument, however, Rush incorporates the newer theme of national guilt for slavery, concluding the argument that “national crimes require national punishments” (30) and—recalling the Quakers in Germantown nearly ninety years earlier—warning readers to “Remember the eyes of all Europe are fixed upon you, to preserve an asylum for freedom in this country, after the last pillars of it are fallen in every other quarter of the Globe” (28).

Oddly enough, in spite of the effectiveness of Rush’s antislavery arguments, it may have been his own “solution” to the problem of slavery that gave rise to the concept of gradual emancipation. According to Bradley, while “the usual Quaker flourishes were

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<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Rush, *An Address to the Inhabitants Of The British Settlements in America, Upon Slave-Keeping*, 1773, *Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans*, UNCG, Greensboro, NC, 25 November 2006 <<http://libproxy.uncg.edu>>: 33.

generally missing in favor of the espousal of immediate and practical ways to eliminate slavery” (113), Rush himself recommended a process that ultimately resembles the very emancipation process that the Quakers had rejected for so long. Dumond summarizes Rush’s proposal: “Stop importing slaves. Retain under our personal care all aged and infirm slaves. Educate the youngsters, train them in some business, put a limit on their period of service, then free them and give them all the privileges of free-born British subjects” (21). What Rush proposed, then, was a truly “gradual” emancipation that prescribed greater steps toward manumission than the Pennsylvania legislature soon enacted, but far less than the Quaker abolitionists had urged for decades.

In 1780, after much debate, the Pennsylvania legislature—which by that time was composed of Quakers, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Baptists—passed the Gradual Emancipation Act of 1780 by a vote of 34 to 21. The legislature rejected the immediate emancipation of the current generation, arguing that it “would create difficulties since most of them were ‘scarcely competent of freedom,’ but the manumission of Negro infants would provide for ‘the gradual abolition of servitude for life ... in an easy mode” (qtd. in Zilversmidt 126).

## **Conclusion**

After nearly a century of protracted efforts on the part of the abolitionists, the emancipation “solution” reached by the Pennsylvania legislature in 1780 enacted a method that was never argued by those seeking an end to slavery. In his overview of the emancipation movement, *Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America*, Dwight

Dumond maintains that the Quaker abolitionists of the seventeenth and eighteenth century “never countenanced economic arguments, either in support of slavery or in defense of gradual emancipation” (90).

Although a belief in the slave’s right to immediate freedom was implicit in Quaker antislavery writing of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the decades-long struggle to end slaveholding among their members became the reformers’ own “gradualist” process. From initial efforts to curtail the purchase by Friends of imported slaves and—once they had won concessions in the Quaker assembly to that end—to later demands that the Society prohibit the holding of slaves, the drawn-out, gradual process itself became the essence of “Quaker emancipation.”

In the end, nearly a century of petitions to end Negro slavery in Pennsylvania would result only in a legal compromise, worded carefully enough to continue for generations to enslave the people the reformers sought to protect.

The immediate release of Negro slaves, so strenuously sought by individual Pennsylvania Quakers between the Germantown protest in 1688 and the Gradual Emancipation Act of 1780, would not be realized until the end of the American Civil War. Still, by the middle of the eighteenth century, their voices brought about at least some change within the Society of Friends, as the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting officially denounced slaveholding in 1754 and enacted a policy in 1758 that prohibited members from buying and selling slaves.



Although these measures by the Society were, at best, marginally influential in stemming the importation of slaves into Pennsylvania, they were the foundation of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, which was established in 1775. The members of the group—which included Benjamin Franklin, jurist William Rawle, and Benjamin Rush—remained vigilant against attempts to rescind Pennsylvania’s gradual abolition law, the first of its kind in the western world.

While the 1780 law has been criticized as only a moderate measure to end slavery, it became a model for black as well as white activists in its time. No sooner had the law taken shape than fugitive slaves and kidnapped free Negroes began decades of attempts to make it to “free” Pennsylvania,<sup>27</sup> where the American abolition movement originated.

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<sup>27</sup> Richard S. Newman, *The Pennsylvania Abolition Society: Restoring a Group to Glory*, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 26 November 2006 <<http://www.hsp.org/default.aspx?id=815>>.

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