

James G. Bosker, ed., Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems  
About Slavery, 1660-1810 (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002)

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS  
["THOMAS PAINE"] (1767-1848)

Son of President John Adams, and himself sixth President of the United States, John Quincy Adams pursued a career in public service spanning more than fifty years. A Federalist from early in life, Adams joined in the mockery of Jefferson when the Hemings scandal erupted. As this satire suggests, the young Adams was not concerned about the moral aspects of slavery so much as its political implications. But later, during the eighteen years he served in Congress after his presidency, Adams would become the champion of antislavery petitioners to Congress—so indefatigable in his efforts that the notorious “gag-rule” (1838–44) was passed to silence him. Perhaps the highest moment of his antislavery activity came in 1841, when, as an old man, he argued the case of the *Amistad* captives before the Supreme Court and won their freedom. In this early poem, as his prefatory material wryly suggests, Adams takes as his premise the absurd postures into which human beings are cast by the institution of slavery.

*Horace, Book II, Ode 4. To Xanthia Phoeus*

Imitated by Thomas Paine (Not the Boston Poet, but the Sophist of Thetford,) and Addressed to Thomas Jefferson

“Young as we are, and with such a country before us to fill with people and with happiness, we should point in that direction the *whole generative force of nature*, wasting none of its efforts in mutual destruction.”

—Jefferson’s notes on Virginia, page 257.

See also the same sentiment repeated in the President’s first message to Congress.

*Ancillam amare, heroum exemplo turpe non esse.*

That he had no occasion to be ashamed of being in love with his maid; for that had been the case with many great men.

Dear Thomas, deem it no disgrace  
With slaves to mend thy breed,

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

Nor let the wench’s smutty face  
Deter thee from the deed.  
At Troy’s fam’d seige the bullying blade  
Who swore no laws for *him* were made,  
Robs, kills, sets all in flame—  
A SLAVE in petticoats appears,  
And souse! in love! head over ears  
The Lion’s heart is tame!

Lord of the world, when *Nero* reign’d,  
When fires were his delight  
A SLAVE the Tyger’s bosom chain’d,  
That slave indeed was white.  
Lo! at his feet the fawning train,  
His Smith, Blake, Cheetham and Duane,  
Howling his praise are seen!  
Vice turns to virtue at his nod;  
Imperial Nero, grows a GOD  
And ACTE\* grows a Queen.

Speak but the word! alike for thee  
Thy venal tribe shall swear  
PUREST OF MORTALS thou shalt be  
And SALLY shall be fair.  
No blasted brood of Afric’s earth  
Shall boast the glory of her birth  
And shame thy daughter’s brother,  
To prove thy panders shall conspire  
Some king of Congo was her sire—  
Some Ethiop Queen her mother.

Yet, from a princess and a king  
Whatever be their hue,  
Since none but drivelling idiots spring,  
And GODS must spring from you.  
We’ll make thy Tommy’s lineage lend;  
Black and white genius both shall blend  
In him their rays divine.  
From Phillis Wheatley we’ll contrive

\* [Adams’s note:] For the history of *Acte*, the Emperor Nero’s Sally, and the methods taken by him to correct the procedure of her genealogy, consult his life in Suetonius.

Or brighter Sancho to derive\*  
Thy son's maternal line.

Though nature o'er thy Sally's frame  
Has spread her sable veil,  
Yet shall the loudest trump of fame  
Resound your tender tale.

Her charms of person, charms of mind  
To you and motley scores confin'd  
Shall scent each future age;  
And still her jetty fleece and eyes  
Pug nose, thick lips and ebon [?thighs]†  
Shall blacken Clio's page.

Nay, Thomas, fumble not thy head,  
Though Sally's worth I sing,  
In me, no rival canst thou dread,  
I cause no horns to spring.  
Besides my three score years and ten  
I was not form'd like other men  
To burn for beauteous faces—  
One pint of brandy from the still  
My soul with fiercer joys can fill  
Than Venus and her graces.

(October 30, 1802)<sup>328</sup>

\* [Editor Joseph Dennie's note:] It appears that Paine before he wrote this incomparable Ode or Epithalamium, had attentively studied his friend's *Notes on Virginia*. Phyllis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho are there mentioned as the two prodigies of African intellect. *There* is to be found a learned and ingenious comparison between the blacks and the whites, both in a moral and physical point of view. The *immoveable* veil of black, the *scented bodies*, and sundry other properties of the negroes delicately alluded to here, are all noticed in that immortal work. It contains moreover the important discovery that "the difference between the black and the white complexion is *as real* as if its seat and cause were better known to us."

With respect to the amatory propensities of the blacks, the *Notes on Virginia* remark, that "love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation." And again, "Their love is *ARDENT*, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination." Upon this point the Author's testimony is beyond all exception. *Crede experti.*

† Bracketed word omitted in original.