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# Not Too Ferocious for *Liberty Bell* Readers:

## *The Slave Woman's Justified Reactions and Retaliations*

*Elizabeth Daley*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's ferocious abolitionist poem "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" depicts the life of a slave woman who falls in blissful love with another slave, is raped by her master, desperately flees from slave hunters, murders her white child, repeatedly curses white men, and dies at the mercy of her master's whip. Originally published in the 1848 issue of *The Liberty Bell*, an anti-slavery annual, this dramatic monologue radically confronts American slavery in ways that expose the master's brutality and the slave's often hostile retaliations.

A longstanding argument among critics is whether or not "The Runaway Slave" was too radical to evoke sympathy from its primarily Northern audience in Antebellum America and to achieve *The Liberty Bell's* purpose of convincing readers to "expunge slavery from the land" (Jeffrey 42). Reiterating a broadly accepted claim among scholars, Marjorie Stone reports that Browning "drew on the conventions of abolitionist writing," but modified her poem with a "relatively radical nature" (Stone, "From *The Liberty Bell*" 331). Yet Browning herself questions the extremity of her poem in saying that it was "too ferocious, perhaps, for the Americans to publish,"

because she “could not help making it bitter” (qtd. in Stone, “‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ Introduction” 191). Many Elizabeth Barrett Browning scholars agree that the slave character exhibits too much hostility and bitterness toward the readers’ race to evoke sympathy, such as the critics in the 1950s who determined that the poem was “too blunt and shocking to have any enduring artistic worth” (192). Upon conducting a close reading of “The Runaway Slave” and examining contemporary responses to the text, I initially agreed that the insurrectionary slave’s seemingly hostile actions—especially committing infanticide and repeatedly cursing white men—were indeed too ferocious for readers of *The Liberty Bell* who might fall prey to her curses. Nevertheless, after examining “The Runaway Slave” within the context of abolitionist speeches and primary responses to the poem, I argue that the master’s brutality justifies the slave’s retaliations, especially since she targets her master and associated slaveholders, not the generalized white population.

Newspaper articles from the time reveal that Northerners publicly supported Browning’s poem as a morally upright text. One such source, an article from *The Liberator* about an anti-slavery celebration, reports that “Mrs. Rand, of Milford, read with dramatic skill the touching poem of the Runaway Slave, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and was loudly applauded” (“Anti-Slavery Celebration” 4). Despite Browning’s radical strategies, abolitionists publicly admired “The Runaway Slave” and celebrated the fugitive’s touching story with great exuberance in the 1860s. Another author from *The Liberator* likewise declares that “Mrs. Browning has another claim on the gratitude of abolitionists . . . and has made a direct offering on the altar of American Anti-Slavery” (“Runaway Apprehended!” 3). This report reveals that abolitionists widely appreciated Browning’s poem and compares her anti-slavery contribution in *The Liberty Bell* to an altar sacrifice. Interestingly, a *Baltimore Sun* writer emphasizes a similar connection, saying that “when great principles were imperiled, [Browning] was ready to sacrifice herself upon the altar of right” (“Elizabeth Barrett Browning” 4). In saying this, the authors show that the slave’s attempts at liberation and apparent ferociousness were justified as morally right because she challenged the slave owner’s wrongful oppression. These two metaphors—Browning’s sacrifice on the altar of abolition and right—reinforce the notion that Northern Antebellum readers celebrated “The Runaway Slave,” despite its radical strategies and overt bitterness toward white slave masters.

This widespread acceptance of Browning's poem can be more fully understood through the examination of anti-slavery speeches and other texts that illustrate popular Northern beliefs. At an Independence Day celebration in Boston in 1862, African American abolitionist John Rock professed, "What a glorious day of jubilee we shall have when the American nation . . . [is] no longer a nation of hypocrites, but of humane and Christian men" ("Rock" 4). This declaration reveals that Northerners adjudged Southern slaveholders as religious and moral hypocrites who were accountable for their brutalities against slaves. He then continues to create a binary between Northern and Southern beliefs by saying, "The difference between the North and South may be plain enough to us, and we may justly say and believe that the cause of the North is the cause of liberty, of free speech, of freemen—in a word, the cause of civilization" (4). Rock's message about their Southern brothers is one of spite and disappointment; he declares that, as a nation of hypocrites, they are inhumane and unchristian. Likewise, by celebrating the North's pursuit of liberty and civilization for all men, Rock blatantly underscores the South's uncivilized natures that developed from their attachment to slavery. Charlotte Forten, a respected abolitionist writer from the 1800s, applies these beliefs about inhumane, unchristian slave masters to "The Runaway Slave" as she praises the poem for its suitability to her emotions and its powerful arousal of sympathy for victimized slaves. She proclaims:

How earnestly and touchingly does [Elizabeth Barrett Browning] portray the bitter anguish of the poor fugitive as she thinks over all the wrongs and sufferings that she has endured, and of the sin to which tyrants have driven her but which they alone must answer for. It seems as if no one could read this poem without having his sympathies roused to the utmost in behalf of the oppressed. (Forten 343)

Forten emphasizes the character's anguish, suffering, and endurance of moral wrongs at the hands of her master. She acknowledges the slave's evident bitterness and sinfulness but maintains the argument that readers will strongly sympathize with her because the tyrannical master drove her to wrongdoing and is therefore solely accountable for those sins.

A reporter from *The Liberator* furthers the rationalization of the slave woman's hostile actions by saying that "all [people] saw and recognized slavery as a monstrous wrong, and knew that as the nation sowed, so it must reap. . . . The present rebellion, with its barbarities, is the natural fruit of

slavery" ("Elizabeth Barrett Browning" 4). This significant Northern belief greatly enhances contemporary examiners' understanding of "The Runaway Slave" and *The Liberty Bell* readers' likely responses to the text. I argue that the slave woman's retaliations against her master are not too ferocious to evoke sympathy from *The Liberty Bell* readers because the master instigates the rebellion by brutally murdering her lover and impregnating her through rape; the Northern majority believed that, as monstrous men, slaveholders were charged with full accountability for their slaves' reactions to bondage. Therefore, Northern readers of *The Liberty Bell* likely justified the slave woman's infanticide as reactionary to the emotional torment that her master inflicted upon her and recognized that, in strangling her white child, she sought to spare him from the harsher fate of remaining enslaved—a fate justified as a rightful retaliation against her tyrannical master and his troop.

Until her master inflicts brutality upon her, the slave woman in Browning's narrative remains obedient. As she falls in love with another slave, she declares that "I laughed in girlish glee, / For one of my color stood in the track / Where the drivers drove, and looked at me, / And tender and full was the look he gave" (Browning 58–61). Even though the enslaved woman and her lover are whipped by slave gangs as they work in the fields, she focuses on experiencing blissful love. At this point, she does not exemplify bitterness or hostility toward her master's troop, even though they actively force the standard pains of slavery upon her. She reports that "the drivers drove us day by day; / We did not mind, we went our way" (68–69). The slave's admittance that she and her lover are unbothered by the repeated whippings reinforces the argument that she remains obedient until the master enacts brutality against them. Therefore, this supports the popular Northern belief that African American slaves were not uncivilized monsters who bred hatred against the white society. Rather, rebellions began when Southern slave masters initiated cruelty against their innocent slaves.

The master disrupts the slave woman's obedience as a slave when he mercilessly rapes her after murdering her lover. In anguish, the woman says, "They wrung my cold hand out of his,— / They dragged him . . . where? . . . I crawled to touch / His blood's mark in the dust!" (Browning 95–97). Throughout these events, the slave woman displays anxiety and distress over the traumatizing loss of her lover. After her master forces their clinging hands apart and carries the victim away to be murdered, the slave woman desperately searches for evidence of her lover's death. Feeling weary

with agony, she exerts her remaining energy to crawl to his blood pool in the dirt. Browning's specification that the slave's blood seeps 'in the dust' seems symbolic of his rapid, unexpected death; his blood, or physical body, dissolves into the cold earth as the lovers' happiness disintegrates and only the slave woman's stained memory of his existence remains. This traumatizing experience demonstrates the master's unprovoked brutality and disruption of the slave woman's compliance with the slave drivers and her ability to "laugh in girlish glee" even while in bondage (58). After killing her lover, the master inflicts further damage by raping the defenseless slave woman. She weakly describes the experience as a "wrong, followed by a deeper wrong! / Mere grief's too good for such as I. / So the white men brought the shame ere long / To strangle the sob of my agony. / They would not leave me for my dull / Wet eyes!—it was too merciful / To let me weep pure tears and die" (99–105). This rape surpasses grief and agony as the woman becomes desecrated and dehumanized. Her articulate and heart-wrenching description reinforces her claim that rape is a moral wrong committed against any member of civilization, slave or free. Although the master's definite motives remain undisclosed, his sinful assault creates unnecessary grief, shame, and defilement for the slave woman. The act is intrinsically wrong. *Liberty Bell* readers who upheld the belief that slave masters were uncivilized monsters who enacted brutality against their slaves likely agreed that the slave woman would be justified in retaliating against her evil master.

Following the murder of her lover and impregnation through rape, the slave woman flees from the plantation with her white infant, whom she ultimately strangles. Especially since—at least at surface level—she kills the child because of his whiteness, it seems that she commits infanticide to demonstrate animosity against her son, master, and the white race with which they are associated. However, a close reading of the text suggests that she commits infanticide because the child's face and inborn mannerisms unbearably resemble those of her master and because the child's whiteness symbolizes the master's rape. As she flees from her master through the night, she clings to their child and cries, "In that single glance I had / Of my child's face, . . . I tell you all, / I saw a look that made me mad! / The master's look, that used to fall / On my soul like his lash . . . or worse!" (Browning 141–145). In saying this, the slave mother reveals why she cannot bear the pain of her son's presence: his face, skin color, and inborn

mannerisms too closely resemble those of her master, who stole her dignity and happiness through corruption and violence. She explains that the devastating impact of his assault reaches her very soul, thus extending past mere physical or psychological harm. Her use of the word ‘mad’ seems to possess dual meanings: the resemblance of her master in her child’s face—and, by extension, her master’s sexual exploitation—made her angry, but it also took her to the unstable brink of insanity. For this reason, her white son vividly reminds her of the rape, and her master had stripped her of the emotional capacity to tolerate it. Interestingly, the words ‘made me’ precede the word ‘mad,’ which means she denies accountability for her madness and implies that her master—the source of the problem—is responsible for her retaliations. Because the slave woman explains her internal, whole-hearted struggle, Browning prepares Northern readers of *The Liberty Bell* to justify the slave’s reaction.

Once the slave woman distances herself from the plantation and her internal conflicts increase, she can no longer tolerate the white child’s resemblance to her master and ultimately kills the baby. Although this action itself is wrong and ferocious, Northern readers likely recognized that the painful circumstances surrounding the situation drove her to commit infanticide rather than it being a hateful act against the child and his white race. She admits, “I could not bear / To look in his face, it was so white. / I covered him up with a kerchief there; / I covered his face in close and tight” (Browning 120–124). Before smothering her son’s face in a handkerchief, the mother reiterates that it would be sorely unbearable to continue looking at him. Interestingly, she uses the word ‘in’ to specify that she “[looks] in his face” (121), which suggests a deeper level of observing him; since her master’s look invasively fell on her soul while in bondage, she now tries to see beyond her child’s white face and into his innocent soul. But his whiteness is overpowering, and she admits that she can no longer stand his presence. She specifies that she “[can] not” emotionally handle looking at him, not that she “will not” do so (Browning 120). This specificity shows that, for the sake of her well-being and sanity, she must kill the master’s child. Northern Antebellum readers likely sympathized with the slave woman because her deed was “the natural fruit” of her master’s horrid cruelties, therefore placing accountability for those sins upon the Southern slave owner’s shoulders (“Elizabeth Barrett Browning” 4). The slave woman does not commit infanticide out of animosity toward her white son or white

people generally; rather, it is a justified reaction to the emotional torment and possible madness that her master inflicted upon her.

While strangling her child, the slave woman inwardly justifies the act because she spares him from the curse that she directs at her master. She explains that “to save it from my curse, / I twisted it round in my shawl” (Browning 146–147). She decides that, between dying in infancy and living a cursed life as the master’s son, death is the better fate for him. Thus, she kills her child and mercifully spares him from the harsher fate to which he otherwise would have fallen victim. Her belief that death is the child’s better fate connects back to a woeful remark she gives after being raped, saying “they would not leave me for my dull / Wet eyes!—it was too merciful / To let me weep pure tears and die” (103–105). Here, the slave woman asserts her preference for death over the barbaric assault, but that her master remained merciless in complying with this desire. Instead, he metaphorically cursed her with the lasting and active anguish of the assault. When the roles are reversed and the slave woman must decide whether to let the white child live a cursed life or surpass the pains of mortality and enter the “death-dark where [they] may kiss and agree” (251), she chooses the latter. Based on her experiences as a victimized slave, this decision is the better option, proving more merciful because he “[wept] pure tears and [died]” without experiencing the awful pains of slavery or the sins of slave mastery. Although she demonstrates mercy toward her son, she remains steadfast in cursing her master, the men who flog her, and other slaveholders; it seems that she entirely excludes white civilians who do not participate in slavery from her curse. Therefore, she does not commit infanticide because of her animosity toward her master or the white race. Rather, she emotionally reacts to her master’s brutality. When the surrounding circumstances and her justifications are considered, Northern readers would agree that the slave woman’s infanticide is not too ferocious because she sought to spare her child from the harsher fate of being cursed and because the master instigated the rebellion and was therefore charged with accountability for her reactions to chronic bondage.

Next, the master’s hunting troop pursues the slave woman and exemplifies the master’s perpetual monstrous behavior by flogging her, to which she rightfully retaliates by cursing them. Upon being found, the speaker cries, “Ah!—in their ‘stead, their hunter sons! / Ah, ah! they are on me—they hunt in a ring” (Browning 204–205). By characterizing the slaveholders as violent hunters and the slave as their helpless prey, Browning



reinforces the Northern belief that slave owners are inhumane creatures who commit brutalities against dehumanized, enslaved people. In doing this, she prepares primary readers to respond sympathetically and support the victimized slave rather than the guilty white masters. After the men entrap the slave woman, she recounts that “ropes tied me up here to the flogging place. / You think I shrieked then? Not a sound! / I hung, as a gourd hangs in the sun. / I only cursed them all around” (224–227). As the fugitive refrains from screaming and instead focuses her energy on continually cursing the slave hunters, her resolute mannerisms and animosity may seem too ferocious to evoke sympathy from readers. Yet, when readers view her cursing as the result of the immediate flogging and previous experiences, the slave’s actions become justified and are not likely considered too ferocious to evoke sympathy. When the slave woman is at the brink of death, she declares that “whips, curses: these answer those!” (232). This declaration once again justifies her curses because they are in retaliations to her master’s whips. She aims her hostility at tyrannical slave masters—not Northern abolitionists or other individuals who are not involved in slavery. Northerners who believe that Southern slaveholders are accountable for slaves’ ensuing sins and hostile reactions would justify the slave woman’s actions and celebrate Browning’s abolition poem as a whole.

Browning argued that “The Runaway Slave” was “too ferocious, perhaps, for the Americans to publish” (qtd. in Stone, “‘The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point’ Introduction” 191). While I agree that her radical portrayal of slavery was likely rejected by Southerners who supported the institution, I contend that Browning erred in saying that the poem is too ferocious to evoke sympathy from her target audience: Northern readers of *The Liberty Bell*. Rather than saying Browning succeeded in evoking sympathy from readers *despite* the poem’s ferociousness from and toward slave masters, I argue that she succeeded, at least partially, *because* of it. Abolitionist speeches and primary responses to Browning’s poem from the mid-1800s reveal that the Northern majority viewed slaveholders as inhumane men who were brutal to their slaves, thus making them accountable for their slaves’ reactions to bondage; therefore, they likely felt sympathetic for the slave woman as they watched her experience the master’s unprovoked ferociousness and justified her cursing as a rightful retaliations against his tyranny. As for committing infanticide, I argue that she does not make the decision half-heartedly; she only carries out the deed once the white child’s presence

grows unbearable and she believes that death is the best fate for her son. As the slave mother begins to transcend mortal life, she prays that “in the name of the white child waiting for me / In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree, / White men, I leave you all curse-free” (Browning 250–253). In hopes of being serenely reunited with her child “in the death-dark” where race is irrelevant and his resemblance to the master is no longer a barrier, the slave woman revokes her curse. Had Browning upheld the slave’s curse through the end of the poem, Northerners still would have justified it and held the master accountable for her hostile sins. Yet, by removing the curse, the slave reinforces her lack of animosity toward her child and offers mercy to her repeated perpetrator who continues to flog her, thus lessening her ferociousness and heightening that of her master’s. In doing this, Browning allows Northern *Liberty Bell* readers to have their “sympathies roused to the utmost in behalf of the oppressed” (Forten 343).

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