

James G. Basker, ed., Amazing Grace: An Anthology
of Poems About Slavery, 1660-1810 (New Haven:
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SARAH WENTWORTH APTHORP
MORTON (1759-1846)

Daughter of the wealthy and cultured Apthorp family of Boston, Sarah Morton combined intellect, personal beauty, social position, and literary talent. Even as she moved in the highest circles of New England society, her poetic writings earned her the reputation of America's leading female poet, "the American Sappho." Over the decades, her verse appeared in the *Massachusetts Magazine*, *The New York Magazine*, and *The Tablet*, earning the praise of Thomas Paine, Joseph Dennie, and others.

The first of her poems below remained popular throughout the nineteenth-century. The great antislavery poet John Greenleaf Whittier proclaimed "The African Chief" one of his favorite poems. Blending a ballad stanza with historic argument, Morton links the righteousness of the antislavery fight to a series of heroic struggles for freedom, from the Messenians in antiquity to Paoli's Corsicans and Washington's Americans in the eighteenth century.

The African Chief

See how the black ship cleaves the main,
High bounding o'er the dark blue wave,
Remurmuring with the groans of pain,
Deep freighted with the princely slave!
Did all the Gods of Afric sleep,
Forgetful of their guardian love,
When the white tyrants of the deep,
Betrayed him in the palmy grove.
A Chief of *Gambia's* golden shore,
Whose arm the band of warriors led,
Or more—the lord of generous power,
By whom the foodless poor were fed.

Does not the voice of reason cry,
 "Claim the first right that nature gave,
 From the red scourge of bondage fly,
 Nor deign to live a burdened slave."
 Has not his suffering offspring clung,
 Desponding round his fettered knee;
 On his worn shoulder, weeping hung,
 And urged one effort to be free!
 His wife by nameless wrongs subdued,
 His bosom's friend to death resigned;
 The flinty path-way drenched in blood;
 He saw with cold and phrenzied mind.
 Strong in despair, then sought the plain,
 To heaven was raised his steadfast eye,
 Resolved to burst the crushing chain,
 Or mid the battle's blast to die.
 First of his race, he led the band,
 Guardless of danger, hurling round,
 Till by his red avenging hand,
 Full many a despot stained the ground.
 When erst *Messenia's* sons oppressed,
 Flew desperate to the sanguine field,
 With iron cloathed each injured breast,
 And saw the cruel Spartan yield.
 Did not the soul to heaven allied,
 With the proud heart as greatly swell,
 As when the *Roman Decius* died,
 Or when the *Grecian victim* fell.
 Do later deeds quick rapture raise,
 The boon *Batavia's William* won,
Paoli's time-enduring praise,
 Or the yet greater *Washington!*
 If these exalt thy sacred zeal,
 To hate oppression's mad controul,
 For bleeding *Afric* learn to feel,
 Whose Chieftan claimed a kindred soul.
 Ah, mourn the last disastrous hour,
 Lift the full eye of bootless grief,
 While victory treads the sultry shore,
 And tears from hope the captive Chief.

While the hard race of *pallid hue*,
 Unpracticed in the power to feel,
 Resign him to the murderous crew,
 The horrors of the quivering wheel.
 Let sorrow bathe each blushing cheek,
 Bend piteous o'er the tortured slave,
 Whose wrongs compassion cannot speak,
 Whose only refuge was the grave.

(1792)²⁶⁴

The following excerpts are from Morton's unfinished epic about the American Revolution, published in part in 1797. In heaping praise one by one on the colonies that fought the War, Morton does not flinch from condemning the moral inconsistency of freedom-loving societies that practice slavery.

*from Book I of Beacon Hill. A Local Poem,
 Historic And Descriptive.*

Virginia! blest beyond each bordering clime,
 The noblest plume, that lifts the wing of time!—
 Not that luxuriance decks her festive bowers,
 While the rich weed its curling fragrance pours;
 That fatal weed, with many a blossom fair,
 Was nursed by tears, and ripen'd in despair!—
 Not that her ample skirts redundant spread,
 And towering mountains crown her princely head;
 The wasteful wilderness unheeded lies,
 And round those heights the fiend of Slavery hies!—
 Yet thou, *Virginia*, fairest of the fair,
 More bright than all thy radiant sisters are,
 Shalt rise supreme, and every wreath of fame
 Twine its rich foliage round thy *elder* name . . .
 —Child of the sun, proud *Carolina*, rise!
 And say what chief thy haughty hand supplies!
 Canst thou contend for freedom, while yon vale
 Pours its deep sorrows on the sultry gale!
 Thus rise with patriot heart supremely brave,
 Nor heed the scourge, that breaks thy shackled slave! . . .
 Bright *Georgia*, hail!—Though fiery Summer pours
 His fierce electric round thy blasted bowers,
 While in black streams the turbid clouds descend,