

Let justice be done, though the Heavens fall.

— William Murray, Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench

I. Somerset v. Stewart, 1772

The defendant speaks:

As to the issue of baptism,
that drops of transmuted water
guarantee freedom, and one day
each soul may fly away
to Heaven, that is a contract
between my Negro and the good Lord.

God doesn't cost a thing—
no pound, no shilling—
but He doesn't make an African
free, either.

My ownership of my slave
is a contract of property
in England,
the West Indies,
and the American colonies.

My claim follows my slave
to the parted lips of the grave.

I want my veiny
property returned,
an acknowledgment
of what I own.

II. Gregson v. Gilbert, 1783

The plaintiff speaks:

As to the issue of murder,
that the captain of my slave ship
The Zong dumped nearly two
hundred pieces of valuable
black property into the sea,
I will admit his incompetence,
that his miscalculation
was unfortunate—
and very sad!

Had he time for *mercy*, he'd have cut
the Negroes' throats to spare them
the confrontation with the sharks.
My captain is a godly man.
He'd never have done this
to servants of Christ.

The safety of holy water would
have been a keen conundrum.
It is lucky the Africans
remained unbaptized, free
of the Lord's coverture—
as it is, I would sleep soundly,
were it not for the public
outrage of murder—
which is embarrassing to me—
and my need for the four
thousand pounds (or thereabouts)
of lost revenue, for which I am suing.
Those Africans are dead
and I am a businessman.

III. The Public Lord Mansfield v.
The Private William Murray, 1787

The defendant and plaintiff speak:

As to the issue of gossip,
that I give preferential treatment
to a Negress, dress her in colored
silks, bring her into the shadow
of British society—
Dido has become my child.
She was small when her father
brought her to me.
Unsteady, fat legs when she walked,
a tinge of gold murmuring
her mother's Nation, the hair
straight, spiked in wisps.
I cannot say whether my bride
and I would have reared her
had we known Dido's tone
would darken, her hair
rebel into wool—
but she's ours now.
When everyone else leaves
this old couple, Dido
has promised she will remain,
bringing us cups of sweet
milk from the cows
that she tends.
You let me protect
my kindred if you will cover
your own.
Natural law will stay:
morality and bones.

FOUND POEM: RACISM

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Thomas Jefferson, 1787

The first difference which strikes
us is that of colour. Whether the black
of the negro resides in the reticular
membrane between the skin
and scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin
itself; whether it proceeds from
the colour of the blood, the colour
of the bile, or from that of some
other secretion, the difference
is fixed in nature, and is as real
as if its seat and cause were better
known to us. And is this difference
of no importance? Is it not the foundation
of a greater or less share of beauty
in the two races? Are not the fine
mixtures of red and white,
the expressions of every passion
by greater or less suffusions of colour
in the one, preferable to that eternal
monotony, which reigns
in the countenances,
that immoveable veil of black
which covers all the emotions
of the other race?
Add to these, flowing hair, a more
elegant symmetry of form, their
own judgment in favour of the whites,
declared by their preference of them,
as uniformly as is the preference
of the Oranootan for the black