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### **“This horably wicked action”: Abortion and Resistance On a Jamaican Slave Plantation**

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In May 1824, Catalina, also known as Susannah Mathison, an enslaved woman on the Castle Wemyss Estate situated in the parish of St James in Jamaica, successfully induced an abortion, by drinking a herbal tincture. In this paper I examine Catalina’s actions, the context in which these arose, and the reaction of the plantation overseer and manager within their historic context, and within more recent debates and scholarship concerning women’s sexuality, fertility and reproduction as well as claims of resistance and opposition.

Specific acts of abortion are rare in primary sources, and in contemporary writings usually spoken of in general terms. Abortion was by its nature private and hidden. The lived experience of enslaved men and women is submerged in the records and archives of the elite plantation managers and owners, and can only be experienced through the lens of those who held power over them. Women’s lives, in particular, have remained largely invisible. (Mathurin Muir, 1986, 1) Black women’s invisibility has been complicated by the ethnocentric nature of contemporary writings, by both planter and critic of slavery alike, producing a portrait Barbara Bush describes as “either bluntly racialist or tinged with paternalistic sentimentality”. (Bush, 1990, xi)

Catalina lived and worked on the Castle Wemyss estate, a sugar estate situated in the parish of St James in Jamaica, on the north side of the island, inland and east of Montego Bay, and close to the area known as the Cockpit Country. It was of a good size, being 1117 acres, with about 156 acres under cane, but was disadvantaged by its location in the interior of the island with poor access to the wharf.

In terms of the experienced of enslaved labour the estate was typical of many in Jamaica, in 1832 almost half of Jamaica's slaves lived on units of more than 250 slaves (slightly larger than the Castle Wemyss Estate) and more than half of Jamaica's slaves belonged to absentee owners. (Higman, 1976, 69; Higman, 1984, 112)

Gilbert Mathison inherited this estate from his father in 1774 (along with a debt of some £1,600). In 1795 Mathison came to England and then settled in London for thirteen years, returning to Jamaica only in 1808, soon after the 1807 Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, to examine the new situation at first hand. As a result he wrote a tract entitled *Notices respecting Jamaica, 1808, 1809 & 1810*, which was published in London in 1811. (Mathison, 1811) In it he gave his views on the current state of affairs and his proposals for the successful running of a sugar estate in these new times.

Mathison's proposals were influenced by movements towards more scientific agriculture, the increased mechanisation of agriculture and industry, and consideration of ideals of humanitarianism. He contended that with labour becoming limited, priorities had to shift to recognise that the first duty of the owner or overseer was the care and good management of the enslaved labour, and he made various recommendations including those aimed at reducing the incidence of tetanus, encouraging women to give birth in a proper lying-in apartment with attendant midwife, and improving nutrition by increasing provision gardens.

In their history of another Jamaican plantation, Worthy Park, which also carried out similar interventions, Michael Craton and James Walvin describe the motives as unlikely to be more than "nominally humanitarian", with healthier and more humanely treated slaves more likely to be both more efficient in their work and more likely to achieve natural increase in population on the estate. (Craton and Walvin, 1970, 173)

Despite his concerns with plantation management the Castle Wemyss Estate did not produce enough income for Mathison's own needs and the running of the estate, forcing Mathison to borrow money and in 1823 the estate was handed over to Simon Halliday, a member of Mathison's extended family by marriage, in order to clear these debts. Halliday resolved that the estate should be run as under Mathison's ownership, including the despatch of full and regular monthly reports, and these along with the other surviving records provide a detailed picture from 1823 to 1829 of the state of affairs of the estate. Any impressions gained from Castle Wemyss records are necessarily one-sided, and these contain a fairly large number of letters covering a short period, many written to educate the new owner.

Despite efforts of amelioration, after 1802 the Castle Wemyss Estate experienced a continual loss of total slave numbers, falling from 241 to 200 in 1817 and 180 in 1820. Despite purchasing additional slaves in 1823, thus increasing the number to 203, numbers fell to 200 in 1825 and by 1827 numbered only 177. An examination of the records for the years between 1817 and 1828 shows that the greatest drop of numbers came in those aged over forty. In other age groups the decline was constant but slight. (Halliday, 1996, 72-73) This experience was typical of Jamaica and the West Indies as a whole, with an absolute decline in the slave population across the British West Indies in the period from 1807 to 1834. (Higman, 1984, 72)

Catalina, also known as Susannah Mathison, is described in 1824 as a 35 year old Creole Negro. The overseer's monthly report for May 1824 states:

this women having been threatened (tho' not punished) in the Field by the Driver in the course of her work for quarrelling with another woman made a complaint to me at the same time informed me she thought herself pregnant and could not work in great Gang in consequence of which I desired her to be examined by the Midwife who reported her as being so (her infant dying only six weeks previous to the examination of the Midwife) I put her into the second Gang for light employment, the doing so of which excited the curiosity of her fellow Negroes who ridiculed her as making a pretence (she having formerly been a deceiving character) to escape working in the Field. She threatened the Midwife that she would bring on herself an abortion (because the Negroes troubled her) two weeks previous to the facts taking place on Monday May 3rd. She actually went to the Pastures and picked a herb called country Ebo which she boiled and Drank consequently brought on the fact she so coldly premeditated, the Doctor of the Estate was applied to who directed me the confine her until Mr P[hillips, the estates' Attorney] arrived which was done and upon Mr P. strictly examining the case caused her to be confined in the Dungeon for one month

and kept on as much Bread and water only as she could consume as punishment which was attended to. (Castle Wemyss Estate Papers ICS 101/3/2/8)

The attorney sent his slightly differing account of the incident in his next letter to Halliday:

The only case of misconduct is of a woman called Catalina alias Susannah Mathison which is of too serious a nature to overlook, she belongs to a family notoriously bad having been one of those formerly practising Obeah, this woman brought on abortion during last month by drinking profusely of Vervain & Contryerva, which she threatened to do in consequence of a disagreement with her husband, for this horably wicked action I have directed she should be punished with solitary confinement.

In subsequent correspondence Phillips and Halliday agree that it was only because they disagreed with the use of the whip that she had got off so lightly.

At a time when severe flogging was regularly carried out in the Navy, British prisons and penal colonies and punishment remained severe on many estates, Mathison recommended the use of rewards rather than punishment, and every alternative form of punishment before the use of the whip. (Halliday, 1996, 73) When Simon Halliday took over the estate, in one of his earliest letters he wrote that he was by no means a friend of the whip if it can be possibly avoided. The attorney Phillips replied:

I am delighted to hear you say you are not a friend to corporal punishment. Although we cannot do in some instances without the use of the whip it certainly is much oftener used in this country than occasion calls for and it is my constant endeavour to check the improper use of it.

Punishments that are recorded in the papers include imprisonment and the use of the collar.

The reports quoted above reveal moral repugnance, anger at the loss of a unit of natural increase, and the fear of old African heathen ways, but neither the overseer nor attorney commented on the fact that Catalina's action was not necessarily in order to get rid of an unwanted baby, but that her act of defiance was intended to draw attention to her grievances and cause maximum disturbance (in which she was successful).

Hilary Beckles has described enslaved women as "natural rebels", who embody a culture of refusal and resistance through which the individual claims a self and an identity. By placing black woman's 'inner world' – fertility, sexuality and maternity – on the market as capital assets, it is suggested that the system produced a 'natural' propensity to resist and refuse as

part of a basic self-protective and survival response. (Beckles, 1989) Women had the power and will to destabilise the plantation's labour productivity. Enslaved women have been described as being capable of resisting the nature of slavery through a variety of single or collective acts, including malingering, shirking work, shamming illness, lying, stealing and even open defiance and abuse of overseers. (Bush, 1990, 45, 53; Hall, 1999, 92; Mathurin Muir, 2006, 239, 323)

Contemporary accounts describe enslaved women's "everyday resistance". James Thomson, in his 1820 *Treatise on the Diseases of Negroes*...notes, "planters everywhere find pregnant women most difficult to manage. They have so many prejudices, so many wants, that it is impossible to satisfy them. Their situation they well know precludes any chastisement from being had recourse to, and in consequence they are extremely insolent, and it requires great forbearance to submit to their conduct... Most of them when they miss the regular return of their monthly sickness, report themselves pregnant, and require an exemption from the regular labour in the field..."(Thomson, 1820, 112)

Thomson also noted the difficulty in ascertaining whether a woman was pregnant or not, and describes some enslaved women who mistaken in their belief with child, then pretend to say that they have miscarried. (Thomson, 1820, 112-113) Dancer in his description of the signs of pregnancy, warns that "a woman can have no certain proof of being with child before the fourth month when the child quickens". (Dancer, 1809, 267-268)

In the years prior to and with the abolition of the slave trade concerns about fertility and reproduction increased in the West Indies, primarily motivated by the need to sustain labour supplies. Throughout the period of slavery, it was suspected that women procured abortions and actively managed fertility.

Contemporary accounts of abortion are included in the writing of white planters, doctors and estate attorneys. Care must be taken in the interpretation of contemporary accounts of "abortions" – the terms miscarriage and abortion being used indiscriminately to cover both spontaneous and deliberate abortion. Collins describes abortions as "frequently accidental, and sometimes spontaneous, being solicited by art", either through physical means or by use of "simples of the country" (Collins, 1811, 134) while Sells in 1823 described enslaved

women as being “liable to abortion”, referring to miscarriage. (Sells, 1972, 16-17) Morgan notes too it would have been difficult for doctors to distinguish between many cases of spontaneous miscarriage and self-induced abortions. (Morgan, 2006, 246) We need also be mindful that contemporary accounts were not written in political neutral times, and must be read in light of contemporary debates on the conditions of slavery and arguments for and against abolition.

De la Beche attributed the decrease in population in part to, “the practice too many of the young women have, of procuring abortions in the early stages of pregnancy, from their dread that child-bearing will interfere with the pursuit of their favourite amusements, and their dislike of the restraint that it necessarily imposes on them.” (cited in Higman, 1976, 100) Other contemporary writers mentioning the practice of procuring abortions include Governor Edward Trelawney and Edward Long. (Long, 1774, 435-439; Trelawney, 1774, 35-56) Reverend Henry Beame wrote of Jamaican slaves in 1826:

The procurement of abortion is very prevalent... there being herbs and powders known to [slaves], as given by obeah men and women... these observations respecting abortion have been collected entirely from Negroes, as the white medical men know little, except from surmise. (cited in Craton, Walvin and Wright, 1976, 141)

John Williamson’s account of his residence and medical practice in the West Indies, describes visiting a woman at Dovehall who was suspected of using means for an abortion; and another incident where Caroline, an enslaved woman, was supposed to have been in her seventh month of pregnancy and became hysterical, on account of some dishonest imputation brought against her by her fellow servants, and had then taken some violent ingredient to procure an abortion, though Williamson found that she had not been guilty of the second claim. (Williamson, 1817, 129-130, 326)

Another physician, James Thomson, a few years later described a great aversion to becoming early mothers, leading to inducing attempts at abortion. Thomson describes “early and unbounded indulgence in venereal pleasures” as a common cause of sterility, and deliberate attempts to procure abortions and reduce fertility as resulting from “peculiar prejudices and an aversion to relinquish their former habits”. (Thomson, 1820, 110-111)

In contrast to these descriptions of desires to be rid of children, John Stewart wrote “the affection and solicitude of a negro mother towards her infant is indeed ardent even to enthusiasm. The crime of infanticide, ... was perhaps never heard of among the Negro tribes”. (Stewart, 1808, 235) Gregory Matthew describes visiting his estate and “every woman who had a child held it up to show to me, exclaiming, - ‘see massa, see! Here nice new Negro me bring for work for massa”. (Matthew, 1834, 217)

Catalina used two common plants to induce her abortion – *contrayerva*, which was used medicinally for a variety of ailments, including use as a diuretic and purgative, and to promote terms, treating the obstruction of menses and *vervain*<sup>1</sup>, a native plant of Jamaica used as a remedy for worms, as a purge, to treat diarrhoea, to initiate menstruation, and to treat the pain that lingers on confinement. (Long, 1774, 717,760; Dancer, 1809, 262-3, 379-386; Asprey and Thornton, 1953; Berry, 1999, 49, 226)

It has been suggested that enslaved women may have brought knowledge of abortion and contraception with them to the Caribbean. Traditional African societies used herbs, the leaves of shrubs, plant roots and the bark of some trees for this purpose, under certain circumstances. (Bush, 1996, 204) Claims that many West Indian plants used for medicinal purposes were of African origin have been criticised as unsubstantiated. Berry found that few plants originating exclusively from Africa that were then transferred to the West Indies, and none that could have been transferred by Africans themselves. (Berry, 1999, 66-68) Rather than suggesting a discontinuity of knowledge I suggest this indicates a dynamic exploration of the properties of similar plants may well have taken place.

More recent scholarship has tried to quantify, understand and explain contraception and abortion in the West Indies during the period of slavery. With little direct evidence and lacking enslaved women’s own accounts of their actions, such work is by its nature largely speculative. Barbara Bush in her study of slave women in Caribbean society has stated that abortion and contraception may have been a form of slave resistance. (Bush, 1990, 139) Despite the lack of concrete evidence more recently Bush has contended that the natural increase in reproduction after 1838 suggests and supports the proposition that the

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<sup>1</sup> Vervain = *Verbena Jamaicaensis* (*Stachyterpheta Jamaicaensis*)

management of fertility was “a form of hidden, individual protest against slavery”. (Bush, 1996, 209)

Lucille Mathurin Muir, with some note of caution claims that, within the limits of the knowledge available to her at the time, enslaved women probably practiced abortion as well as lengthy breastfeeding, as matters of choice, and that spontaneous abortion must have been frequent, but induced abortion also seems widespread. (Mathurin Muir, 2006, 241) She also notes that: “whether the slave woman interrupted her pregnancies in her own personal interest or in order to frustrate the estate’s labour needs, the effect was the same, the proprietor was touched in his most vulnerable spot”. (Mathurin Muir, 2006, 240)

Whether abortion was pursued by enslaved women as a political strategy of resistance can not be verified from the surviving evidence. (Morgan, 2006, 252) By the overseers account Catalina had recently lost an infant, who had been born in October 1823. Further investigation of the reports included in this collection reveals that less than a year after this incident, in March 1825, she was safely delivered of a baby girl who survived. We also know that Catalina was one of a few married slaves on the estate, having married William Polson on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1822. (Returns relating to Slave Population in West Indies, Berbice and Demerara, 1826, 465)

Catalina is described as a quarrelsome woman, and the accounts of the overseer and attorney sit well with this description. Her act in inducing an abortion may be read by some as an act of resistance. Yet such an interpretation is questionable. Catalina appears to have not been generally reluctant to bear children, as the evidence of her lost infant child and latter birth suggest. Catalina’s action, if indeed she did induce an abortion, is described as a specific reaction to perceived injustice, and seems to fit better with Trevor Burnard’s concept of ‘opposition’, operating as it did within the system of slavery and not threatening the system itself. (Burnard, 2004, 218)

Catalina’s action (and the action of other women on the Castle Wemyss estate) demonstrates enslaved women’s agency and independence. Catalina used knowledge, passed down through her family, to control her own body and reproductive functions. Whether in protest at the actions of her husband, the other enslaved workers or the estate managers, her act was, at heart, one of defiance.

This single case, demonstrates that a careful reading of, and against, the records of slave owners can reveal details illustrating potentially liberating narratives. But it warns we need to be cautious in how we interpret such cases. If contemporary accounts of abortion and low fertility, and the ascribed causes of these, need to be read carefully, we need to remember that ours is also not a politically neutral era. The discourse of resistance, although an attractive one, needs continued and more careful examination.

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