

## **Madison Washington: A Black Odyssean Hero in Antebellum America**

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Frederick Douglass draws on the Classical hero Odysseus for his portrayal of Madison Washington, the protagonist of *The Heroic Slave* (1852). The Greco-Roman world is considered the birthplace of Western civilization and the apogee of its culture. For the greater part of modern history, a Classical education was the beating core of any Western course of study and an exclusive possession of the few who held power in their societies. But, the African-American intellectual was an important figure in the democratization of Classical learning, precisely because he was never supposed to have had access to it in the first place. He had to construct a concealed system of self-education, especially during the antebellum period, trespassing on the heavily guarded preserve of the elite. Douglass appropriates the Classics from the elite plantation-owning class of antebellum America and repurposes this canon for the cause of abolition by writing Madison Washington in the guise of the Classical hero Odysseus. Douglass begins Madison's story in medias res, a hallmark of the epic tradition. We meet Madison, a runaway slave, on the penultimate stop of his perilous journey to Canada. Separated from his family by necessity, Madison embarks upon a noble odyssey to freedom marked by many twists and turns. The Homeric epics make full use of the literary device of the epithet. Odysseus is often referred to by Homer as "the wanderer." Douglass assigns Madison a similar epithet, often referring to him simply as "our traveler" (Douglass 7). The characterization of *The Heroic Slave* recalls that of the *Odyssey* of Homer. Douglass's depiction of Mr. Listwell harks back to the Phoenicians of *The Odyssey*—they both serve as the helping hand that transports these destitute heroes to their long-awaited destinations.

But the destinations are not the end of the journey for Madison or Odysseus—they are in fact the beginning of the fight to achieve their ultimate objectives. By way of the plot structure, characterization, and his employment of the generic conventions of the Homeric epic in *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass depicts Madison as an epic hero and abolition as an Odyssean quest.

The reality for blacks in nineteenth-century America was that the economy was built on their perpetual enslavement, so the white ruling class had a vested interest in oppressing them to maintain control. In addition to physical control, they seized control of the rights to culture, erasing Africans (and their descendants) from the grand stage on which the great monuments of human history stand erect as testaments to the legacies of their ancestors. Furthermore, black reality was severed from African history, and blackness was reduced to the condition of an individual's enslavement, essentializing their exploitation.

Classical antiquity was appropriated by the plantation-owning class as a symbol of white superiority. The racial hierarchy that whites at the very top used to keep blacks at the bottom was in part enforced by a habitus of classicism. For James Porter, classicism is the valuation or the idealization of Greco-Roman antiquity, and the term “describes not a series of real properties in the world, but a set of attitudes about the world” (Porter 40). The Southern gentry configured this set of attitudes to define themselves against the racialized “other.” John C. Calhoun said that knowledge of Greek is a litmus test for humanity, famously remarking “that if he could find a Negro who knew the Greek syntax, he would then believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man” (Scarborough 342). Alexander Crummell, a black intellectual and contemporary of Douglass, a man who had indeed learned Greek, offered the following rebuttal:

Just think of the crude asininity of even a great man! Mr. Calhoun went to Yale, to study the

Greek Syntax, and graduated there. His son went to Yale to study the Greek Syntax, and graduated there. His grandson, in recent years, went to Yale, to learn the Greek Syntax, and graduated there. Schools and Colleges were necessary for the Calhouns, and all other white men to learn the Greek syntax. And yet this great man knew that there was not a school, nor a college in which a black boy could learn his A. B. C.'s. He knew that the law in all the Southern States forbade Negro instruction under the severest penalties. How then was the Negro to learn the Greek syntax? How then was he to evidence to Mr. Calhoun his human nature? Why, it is manifest that Mr. Calhoun expected the Greek syntax to grow in *Negro brains* by spontaneous generation! (Scarborough 342).

Crummell exposed the faulty assumption behind Calhoun's claim. Calhoun's premise is that one can judge the humanity of an entire group of people by whether they know something that the ruling class has taken great pains to withhold from them. Crummell identified schooling, which was not available for blacks, as a necessary precursor to learning the Greek syntax. Through study at Cambridge University, Crummell was in fact able to learn Greek. However, Crummell's personal success with Greek did not dispel the kind of thinking that prompted Calhoun's statement and that used the Classics to dehumanize blacks.

Frederick Douglass, too, contended with the racist assumptions underlying Calhoun's thinking. His writings reveal a dialogue between his identity as a black man and that of an American, backdropped by a country that hated black Americans. While there is a powerful African influence on Douglass, the Western context of his lived experience, too, helped to shape his writing. The Classical canon played a large part in defining Western culture, and I am interested in how Douglass repurposed this canon for the causes of abolition and social reform.

Douglass was familiar with the Homeric epics. Both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* of Homer are among the works he kept in the personal library of his Cedar Hill home. Other books found in his library suggest that Douglass acquired knowledge of the Classical languages. The following titles from his personal library offer an impression of Douglass's progress in Latin: *First Book in*

*Latin* by John McClintock and George R. Crooks; *A Latin Grammar for Schools and Colleges* (1885) by Albert Harkness; and *Opera: The Works of Virgil with Copious Notes, Mythological, Biographical, Historical, Geographical, Philosophical, Astronomical, Critical, and Explanatory in English Designed for the Use of Students in the Colleges, Academies and Other Seminaries in the United States* (1855) by Rev. J.G. Cooper. It is important to note that, while the notes to the *Opera* are in English, the works of Virgil are in the original Latin.

An impression of Douglass's progress in Greek may be formed from the following books that were found in his personal library: *A First Book of Greek* by John M'Clintock and Geo. R. Crooks; *An Introduction to Greek Language for Use in Schools and Private Learners* (1860) by Asahel C. Kendrick; *First Lesson in Greek: Adapted to the Greek Grammars of Goodwin and Hadley, and Designed as an Introduction to Xenophon's Anabasis and Similar Greek* (1881) by William S. Scarborough; and *Second Book in Greek* by John M'Clintock. Douglass, an autodidact, made significant progress in his study of the Classical languages. Douglass moved from poring over elementary grammars and vocabularies to reading the *Opera* of Virgil in Latin, and Xenophon in Greek.

Douglass's copy of *First Lesson in Greek* (1881), was written by William Sanders Scarborough, "the first professional black classicist," who, according to the *New York Times*, was the "first member of his race to prepare a Greek textbook suitable for university use" (Gates, Jr. XV). What an answer to Calhoun's challenge! Not only did Scarborough know the Greek syntax, but he went on to teach it as Professor of Classics in Wilberforce University. Born a slave, Scarborough eventually rose to become President of Wilberforce University. He was the first lifetime black member of the American Philological Association as well as the Modern Language Association. Scarborough was a lifelong admirer of Douglass, referring to him as "a magnificent figure to observe—dignity personified in every moment," adding that "it was well for the Negro everywhere that such a representative was called to be within the

observation of the nations gathered” at the 1892 Columbian Exposition in Chicago (Scarborough 129, 130). Scarborough and Douglass collaborated on several important projects, such as serving on the board of directors of the Barber Institute, a school for blacks in the South, and drafting statements for the Republican National Convention of 1888. Douglass writes to Scarborough, thanking him for his support at a time when the press was against him: “It is gratifying to find that while the colored newspapers in some instances can find nothing in me to approve, and much to condemn, that I have the confidence and approval of gentlemen and scholars like yourself” (Scarborough 319). Douglass, distinguished in years, had come to recognize the first black classicist as a colleague. When Douglass received Scarborough’s book, he received it with admiration and respect, for he appreciated it as the intellectual triumph of a fellow slave turned scholar.

Scarborough also served as a symbol for the fashioning of African American subjectivity in post-bellum nineteenth-century America:

[Scarborough] attended philological conferences, published papers, and taught Greek and Latin at a university...he did the work that a professional academic does. But if the study of the classics seems marginalized today, it must be remembered that in the late nineteenth century this field was the measure of erudition and the quality of one’s education. The emphasis on the classics in the American curriculum was a legacy of Europe, and to have a black man succeed in this field of study meant that another legacy was upended: the Western idea that blacks did not possess the intellectual capacity to learn. Scarborough, the member of many scholarly societies, was a learned man who effectively rebuked prevalent theories of African intellectual inferiority and cultural primitivism...Scarborough lived, studied, and taught during a period when theories of college education were shifting from a classical ‘learnedness’ to a modern practicality, from a celebration of scholarship to an emphasis on vocation...[Scarborough’s] radical act of self-fashioning: a former slave became a professor through force of will, through a determination to use his intellect rather than his brute strength as a means of defining his position in American life. Were it not for Scarborough, the first professional black classicist, it is conceivable that the departments that have spent many years ignoring him would not exist: he provides a model for African Americans’ formal entry into and full participation in the academy. If his story is highly individualized and even atypical, it is also a larger story of the authentication and recognition of the African American as an intellectual being. (Gates, Jr. XIV, XV)

Scarborough’s journey from slavery to scholarship is a representation of the postbellum African American’s journey to self-definition. African American identity is a collision of African

memory and Western circumstance. This identity came into being because of the Western context of the black American's lived experience, so *it is* a distinctly Western identity. In a break from the model of Classics that Porter describes as “an aim to discipline one's pleasures...and [cultivate] a pleasurable form of attachment to history and its values,” Scarborough used the Classics to represent himself as an intellectual in a society that considered him a beast of burden (Porter 47, 48). As an academic, he contributed to the study of Classical literature and philology; as a teacher, he disseminated this knowledge at the nation's first private historically black university, working to “[break] down the monopoly of knowledge which has so long enabled the few to rule and oppress the many” (Richard 39).

Douglass made a path for Scarborough. To Douglass, Greek and Latin could be marshalled to support the cause of freedom. These languages are the rudder of the ship of Western culture that Douglass had commandeered from those who used a narrow construction of “Western-ness”—a construction that purposefully excluded blacks—to maintain the system of slavery. In his appropriation of the Classical canon, Douglass repurposed a symbol of oppression for the cause of abolition, and a structuralist reading of his novella *The Heroic Slave* will demonstrate its dialogue with Homer's *Odyssey*.

Homer begins the epic poem with an invocation to a muse (presumably Calliope, the muse of epic poetry). He beseeches her to “sing...of the man..of twists and turns...[and the] many cities of men he saw and [the minds he] learned; [the] many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea, fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home...Launch out on his story Muse, daughter of Zeus, start from where you will—sing for our time too” (Homer 77). Douglass begins *The Heroic Slave* with an invocation to Clio, the muse of history, inviting America to sing of the unsung hero

Madison Washington: “The State of Virginia is famous in American annals for the multitudinous array of her statesmen and heroes. She has been dignified by some the mother of statesmen. History has not been sparing in recording their names, or in blazoning their deeds. Her high position in this respect, has given her an enviable distinction among her sister States” (Douglass 3). But a black American hero who bears the name of two U.S. Presidents will only have the bill that sold his bartered flesh to another human being as a record of his existence: “By some strange neglect, one of the truest, manliest, and bravest of her children...holds now no higher place in the records of that grand old Commonwealth than is held by a horse or an ox” (Douglass 4). In the annals of history, the exceptional slave holds no higher position than a beast of burden, for history only remembers him as a piece of property. He is denied *kleos*, renown or glory, because he is denied humanity. Douglass beseeches Clio, the muse of history, for this *kleos*, inviting the muse to sing of the humanity of Madison Washington, and to proclaim the name of this disregarded American hero before the nation so that his deeds may also be blazoned in the annals of history.

Like Odysseus, Madison is an itinerant figure. In fact, Madison is often referred to by the epithet, “our traveler” (Douglass 7). The literary device of the epithet is a hallmark of Homeric epic poetry, and the one chosen for Madison parallels one of the epithets given to Odysseus, “the wanderer.” By employing a similar epithet, Douglass alludes to Homeric heroism in his depiction of Madison. Both Madison and his odyssey to freedom evoke another of Odysseus’ epithets, “man of twists and turns.” Homer’s *Odyssey* establishes the significance of the archetypal journey. Douglass’s decision to have Madison’s journey parallel that of Odysseus’ reflects his conviction that a slave’s journey into freedom partakes in the same significance.

Madison, like Odysseus, has been forced to separate from his wife and strives toward their

reunion. As a member of the company who had sworn to protect the marriage of Helen and Menelaus, Odysseus was forced to sail to Troy with the Greek alliance to recover Helen from the Trojan Prince, Paris. In so doing, he had to tear himself away from his beloved wife and infant son, unsure if he would ever see them again. Similarly, Madison is forced to leave his family, journeying to a faraway land—Canada—to fight for their chance at freedom. Madison describes their separation: “Our parting was like tearing the flesh from my bones” (Douglass 16). Initially, Odysseus tries to get out of going to Troy by pretending to be insane. He only drops the ruse and demonstrates his sanity to save his young son when Palamedes places baby Telemachus on the path of Odysseus’ plow. Douglass invokes the anguish of Odysseus’ separation from his family—an event that happens before the Homeric epic poems—as a starting point for the comprehension of how slavery abused the black family. There was no legal structure for recognizing marriages between slaves, and children born to enslaved women inherited their mother’s condition. As far as the State was concerned, these groups of people were not families, but individual chattels to be disposed of at the whims of those who called themselves the owners of other human beings. Madison seeks to protect his family from this system by establishing a home for them in Canada, where their family could not be torn apart so easily.

In *The Heroic Slave*, Mr. Listwell is analogous to the Phoenicians of *The Odyssey*. The Phoenicians more than recompense Odysseus for his lost treasures and then transport him back to Ithaca—his destination—after he washes up on their shores. Madison similarly arrives “on the shores” of Mr. Listwell’s property, seeking sanctuary. After providing him with food, a place to rest, and money, Mr. Listwell secures transportation for Madison to his destination—Canada. Upon his arrival at the Listwells, Madison asks Mr. Listwell for shelter: “I am a fugitive from



slavery...I am on my way to Canada where I learn that persons of my color are protected in all the rights of men; and my object in calling upon you was, to beg the privilege of resting my weary limbs for the night in your barn...You will do me a great favor by affording me shelter for the night” (Douglass 12). Mr. Listwell accedes to this request, hears Madison’s story, and assists him in his fight for freedom. True to his name, Mr. Listwell listens well rather than unilaterally deciding what is best for Madison. This character models a more representative approach than the one taken by the Garrisonian abolitionists, from whom Douglass had parted, to the liberation of slaves. Rather than speak over blacks, which is another form of oppression, the abolitionists should provide the means to allow the oppressed to liberate themselves.

For both Madison and Odysseus, arriving home is the beginning of the final battle before they can be reunited with their families. Odysseus could not reveal his identity to anyone until he defeated the suitors who had invaded his home. The suitors were scoundrels who were attempting to steal his wife and usurp his throne. For years, they had been plundering his wealth and tormenting his family. Once Odysseus eliminated them, he could at long last reunite his family in peace. For Madison, the last piece of the puzzle was to rescue his loving wife from bondage, reuniting his family in freedom.

Douglass’s narrative confirms a subtle detail of Aristotelian poetics in a way that reinforces the critique of chattel slavery. Wily Odysseus is expected to defeat the suitors. As an admirable figure in the Aristotelian mode, he “should not be seen undergoing a change from good fortune to bad fortune” (Aristotle 20). Instead, the epic hero should triumph, and his outcome should be a positive one. However, Madison’s efforts to free his wife are ultimately unsuccessful:

Six weeks ago I reached my old master’s place. I laid about the neighborhood nearly a week,

watching my chance, and, finally, I ventured upon the desperate attempt to reach my poor wife's room by means of a ladder. I reached the window, but the noise in raising it frightened my wife, and she screamed and fainted. I took her in my arms, and was descending the ladder, when the dogs began to bark furiously, and before I could get to the woods the white folks were roused. The cool night air soon restored my wife, and she readily recognized me. We made the best of our way to the woods, but it was now too late,—the dogs were after us as though they would have torn us to pieces. It was all over with me now! My old master and his two sons ran out with loaded rifles, and before we were out of gunshot, our ears were assailed with 'Stop! stop! or be shot down.'

Nevertheless we ran on. Seeing that we gave no heed to their calls, they fired, and my poor wife fell by my side dead, while I received but a slight flesh wound. I now became desperate, and stood my ground, and awaited their attack over her dead body. They rushed upon me, with their rifles in hand. I parried their blows, and fought them 'till I was knocked down and overpowered. (Douglass 37, 38)

While Odysseus is able to save his wife, Madison is not. This would appear to contradict Aristotle's prescriptions for a good tragedy, but it is actually consistent with his theory. According to the *Poetics* of Aristotle, "decent men...seen undergoing a change from good fortune to bad fortune...[evokes]...disgust" (Aristotle 20). Susan's murder should evoke disgust in Douglass's readers. Madison's disempowerment should also evoke disgust in Douglass's readers. Douglass jars his audience out of the romance of a reunion like that of Odysseus' so that they must be confronted with the disgusting reality of chattel slavery in America.

By way of plot structure, Douglass presents Madison as an epic hero. Madison tells his story in *media res*, a mainstay of the epic tradition. When Odysseus washes ashore on the island of the Phoenicians—chronologically the last stop before he heads back to Ithaca—he is asked by their king to tell his story. At that point in the action, he gives a full account of his previous wanderings. After the backstory is explicated, time is thereafter represented in a linear fashion. Similarly, when Madison is granted shelter, Mr. Listwell requests he recount the adventures of his journey thus far. After Madison relates his travails up to that point in time, Douglass has the plot continue from Madison's present.

In the hero's battle with nature, Athena and Madison's wife take on similar roles. Athena intercedes on Odysseus' behalf against the god of the sea, Poseidon, who sends many storms to keep Odysseus from returning to Ithaca. Madison's wife similarly intervenes on his behalf against the onslaught of nature: "A season of clouds and rain set in, wholly preventing me from seeing the North star, which I had trusted as my guide...This circumstance was fatal to my project, for in losing my star, I lost my way" (Douglass 15). Madison's wife functions as his surrogate North Star. Like Athena, she serves as a guide for Madison, showing him the way to safety, and telling him to make the woods his home (Douglass 16). Susan is described by Madison as his "good angel," a parallel to Athena's status as divine intercessor (Douglass 16). As the bearer of provisions, she provides Madison with sustenance during the five years he spends contending with nature in the swamps.

Both Odysseus' wife, Penelope, and Madison's wife, Susan, are depicted as intelligent women with the ingenuity to use their limited social agency to defend their husbands. They are intellectual matches for these brilliant men. When Odysseus' kingship and reputation are threatened by the suitors, Penelope devises a scheme to protect her husband's position. Since her society does not empower her to refuse their unwanted advances, she tells them that she needs to weave a burial shroud for her aged father-in-law, Laertes, and she will choose one of them to be her husband when this project is completed. Every day she weaves part of the shroud and every night she undoes the day's work. She is able to carry on this scheme for three years. Susan similarly serves as a source of protection and provision for Madison in spite of her status as a slave. By helping shield her husband from detection, she navigates the constraints of her slave-hood, providing him with the support he needs to stay alive: "It was soon necessary for [Susan] to return

to the house...her absence from the kitchen, if discovered, might have excited suspicion. Our parting was like tearing the flesh from my bones; yet it was the part of wisdom for her to go. She left me with the purpose of meeting me at midnight in the forest... True to her word, my wife came laden with provisions” (Douglass 16). Despite her very limited access to resources, Susan is able to gather all these provisions in a very short amount of time and to avoid detection. It is through the cunning manipulation of the expectations placed on them that both women are able to support their husbands and protect their families in the ways that they do.

The character of Madison Washington is based upon the historical figure of the same name who led the slave rebellion aboard the *Creole*. In the public’s imagination, however, Madison Washington only came into existence after his part in this rebellion; he did not have a history. By having the literary Madison Washington lead a slave rebellion on a ship called the *Creole*, Douglass inscribes the historical Madison Washington within his novella. In giving a past to Madison, Douglass describes what Aristotle, commenting on the universals expressed by poetry, terms, “the kind of thing that would happen” to make a hero like Madison possible (Aristotle 16). The events in the life of the literary Madison leading up to the *Creole* rebellion speak to more than just the particulars of his historical counterpart. They speak to the disempowered black community. They speak to the burgeoning connections between the Classical heritage of Western civilization and the more intimate, generational sharing of the echoes of African heritage. Madison Washington, be he literary or historical, embodies both of these branches of the nascent African American identity.

Though their physical dominance is well recorded, both Madison and Odysseus are famed for their intelligence. Madison is described as having “the head to conceive, and the hand to

execute” (Douglass 7). Among Odysseus’ Homeric epithets are “Zeus’s equal in his mind’s resource” and “resourceful Odysseus.” He is an intellectual peer to Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Odysseus devised the ruse of the Trojan horse that brought Troy down after a ten-year long siege. His speeches stirred his comrades to action over the course of these years. In fact, they were the only reason the Greek coalition remained in Troy long enough to sack her. Madison’s speeches, too, have the power to call men to arms. It is his rousing soliloquy that turns Mr. Listwell into an abolitionist: “I shall go to my home in Ohio resolved to atone for my past indifference to this ill-starred race, by making such exertions as I shall be able to do, for the speedy emancipation of every slave in the land” (Douglass 9). The same artfulness characterizes Madison’s actions aboard the *Creole*:

In the short time he had been on board, he had secured the confidence of every officer. The negroes fairly worshipped him. His manner and bearing were such, that no one could suspect him of a murderous purpose...He seldom spake to any one, and when he did speak, it was with the utmost propriety. His words were well chosen, and his pronunciation equal to that of any schoolmaster. It was a mystery to us where he got his knowledge of language; but as little was said to him, none of us knew the extent of his intelligence and ability till it was too late. (Douglass 47)

It is “resourceful Madison” who makes the rebellion aboard the *Creole* happen. Madison is more like Odysseus than he is a faceless leader of a slave revolt. Because he continues the tradition of Odyssean heroism, Madison provides a model of heroic black leadership that will change the nature of abolition to one oriented toward action. Odysseus, the thinking hero, ultimately won the Trojan war by devising the ruse of the Trojan horse. But the Greeks still needed to burst forth from the Trojan horse to sack Troy. Similarly, Madison’s best weapon is his mind. He frees an army aboard the *Creole* undetected. He is able to ascertain the ship’s position and navigate the path to freedom in the Bahamas. To bring this to bear, however, Madison and his men

had to physically subdue the slave traders and take control of the ship. Thus, it is the Odyssean mind that conceives and the hand that executes in accordance with this conception (Douglass 7). Frederick Douglass's novella, *The Heroic Slave*, provides an opportunity to understand the relationship between Classics and African American identity in a more nuanced way. It challenges the appropriation of Classics by white supremacists while simultaneously serving as a foundational work of Classical reception in antebellum African American literature.

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