TYNDALE UNIVERSITY

3377 Bayview Avenue
Toronto, ON
M2M 3S4

TEL:
416.226.6620
www.tyndale.ca

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Dissenting Cosmopolitanism and Helen Maria Williams's Prison Verse

Natasha Duquette, Tyndale University College, Toronto, Canada

ABSTRACT

Helen Maria Williams's ability to engage in various forms of cosmopolitan conversation – both embodied and imagined – arose from her connections to diverse religious communities. A socially conscious Presbyterian Dissenter, of Scottish and Welsh background, Williams expressed convictions regarding what we would now recognize as human rights. Through her early verse, she advocated for the autonomy of indigenous South Americans and for Africans held in slavery. Once she turned her attention to the French Revolution, she was attracted to its ideas regarding abolitionism, women's participation in the public sphere, and forms of festivity uniting Protestants and Catholics. When imprisoned along with other British citizens, essentially held hostage at a time of war, she maintained her faith in revolutionary principles through forms of cosmopolitan creativity. Such activity, which included listening to and transcribing a collaboratively composed French hymn, reflected her identity as a religious dissenter. Twenty-first century theories of cosmopolitanism which focus on sociability – such as Kwame Anthony Appiah's definition of cosmopolitan conversation as imaginative encounter and Elijah Anderson's attention to cosmopolitan canopies – can help frame Williams's collaboratively creative activities within her prison cell. Her hospitality, transcription, translation, and poetic composition arose from acts of sympathetic imagination rooted in her dissenting cosmopolitanism.

By October 1793, when she was held hostage in prison along with fellow expatriate British subjects in Paris, Helen Maria Williams had apparently moved from her position as an actively observing subject, a keen chronicler of revolutions in both the Americas and France, to a more restricted object of surveillance during the Reign of Terror. As a Presbyterian Dissenter of mixed Welsh and Scottish background, Williams had been raised by her widowed mother in the small Northern English town of Berwick-upon-Tweed. With roots on the margins of English society, Williams was sensitive to societal practices of exclusion and oppression. Dissenters in England were excluded from education at Oxford and Cambridge, for example, and could

not participate formally in politics as a member of parliament, since they did not receive communion in the state Church of England. Williams, as a Dissenter with strong cosmopolitan interests in cross-cultural conversation, was drawn to the hopes that the French Revolution held out for greater inclusion, of women as well as people of various classes, of Dissenting Protestants as well as Catholics, in the processes of government. These hopes sustained her during her time of imprisonment, when she was edified by hearing a hymn collaboratively composed and sung by two Girondist political prisoners: Protestant Marc-David Alba Lasource and Catholic Charles Alexis Pierre de Genlis Sillery. Williams's transcription of this French hymn and translation of it into English was an act of creative Dissenting cosmopolitanism. Williams also began translating her friend Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's novel Paul et Virginie (1788) while in prison, and the sonnets she inserted into its narrative place a yearning for home in tension with imagery of international migration and cosmopolitan consciousness.

Earlier that year, in a letter from Paris dated 7 May 1793, Williams drew a connection between what she presents as the unjust treatment of Protestant Huguenots in seventeenth-century France and attacks on religious Dissenters in England during the early 1790s. From her perspective in France, Williams recalls the Birmingham riots of 1791, during which the home of Dissenting theologian and scientist Joseph Priestley was burnt down by a reactionary "Church-and-King" mob. She deploys the memory of these riots to illustrate how violence can emerge from those defending a state church, as well as from revolutionaries. Williams concludes a series of justifications for the French Revolution, in rebuttal to Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), by writing:

> The last example I have to offer is also interesting to Mr. Burke, as it respects the "Majesty of the Church."–A century ago the spirit of persecution drove from France multitudes of its best and most industrious inhabitants, the Protestants; as the same spirit of fanaticism lately discovered in England by "the savages of Birmingham," against the best informed and most valuable of its citizens, the Dissenters, is likely to promote from thence a similar emigration.[1]

Within her response to Burke, Williams quotes from a letter written by Catherine Hutton, a novelist and Dissenter living in Birmingham. Harassed by royalist English rioters, whom she termed "the savages of Birmingham", Hutton hoped they would "be quiet".[2] Implicitly challenging Edmund Burke's xenophobic comparison of French revolutionaries to "American savages",[3] Williams quotes Hutton's phrase to remind her readers of the English capacity for fiercely erratic and inhumane behavior at home. Inverting Burke's projection of violent behavior outwards onto colonized Indigenous peoples via racist stereotypes in his Reflections, Williams recalls a story of brutality at the heart of English society. She worries a cruelly nationalist "spirit of fanaticism" will

lead to further destruction, forcing Dissenters currently living in England to relocate internationally.

Williams vividly illustrates how religious dissent from a state church – whether in divergence from the French Catholic Church in the seventeenth century or the Church of England in the early 1790s – can trigger attacks against religious others, thus forcing them to emigrate as a group. As a Dissenter, Williams was aware of how emigration could occur as a free choice made by those with the privilege and means to relocate internationally or as a flight from violence seen as a last resort by migrating religious minorities. Thus, her Dissenting cosmopolitanism naturally includes sympathy for vulnerable communities on the move, especially those attempting to escape religious persecution.

Her early poem Peru (1784), for example, depicts the mass migration of indigenous Peruvians into Chile after violent attempts to force their conversion. In Peru, Williams's Dissenting background informs her portrayal and critique of violently imposed colonialist religious systems. She symbolizes rigorously enforced state-backed religious oppression through the fictional Catholic priest Valverda, whose "lips unhallowed breathe their impious strain, /And pure religion's sacred voice profane" (Canto 3. lines 23–24).[4] From her perspective as a religious Dissenter, Williams critiques Valverda's attempts at forced conversion of indigenous Peruvians. She then inserts the Dominican Bishop Bartolomé de las Casas into her poetic narrative in order to counter Valverda. In her blend of history and fiction she literalizes the ameliorative effect of las Casas's *Brevisma Relación de la Destruyción de las Indias* (1542), which was written in an attempt to halt the genocidal violence directed towards indigenous populations in South America. Las Casas himself did not ever travel to Peru; but Williams imagines him physically present in the Andes as a way of rendering concrete his text's effectiveness at sparking ameliorative social change. Williams's poetic picturing of a Spanish Catholic bishop rescuing indigenous men and women from oppressive circumstances evinces her growing cosmopolitanism. Juan Sánchez argues that las Casas functions in the role of an "honourary Protestant"[5]within Williams's Peru. However, Williams's audience would have recognized las Casas as Catholic due to popular printings of his text in English translation. Williams's sympathetic depiction of las Casas as an enactor of social justice in fact presents an important exception to what critics present as her general tendency to critique Catholicism.[6] Williams's appreciation of Catholic engagement in collaborative social action, across religious differences, would also motivate her later transcription and translation of the French hymn sung together in the Luxembourg prison by the Catholic Sillery and Huguenot Lasource.

In Peru, Williams incorporates an aspect of politicized song when she introduces the indigenous songwriter and leader Zamor into her plot. Zamor displays "richest gifts of mind" (3. 776) as he composes and sings

his verse amidst mountainous Andean spaces. Williams represents Zamor as the most effective leader in Peru; he gathers his people in communal singing and leads them across a national boundary *en masse*, into Chile. He is a Peruvian version of the Welsh bard as resister of colonial injustice, as exemplified by the titular figure of Thomas Gray's *The Bard: A Pindaric Ode* (1757), a poem quoted by Williams in her *Julia, a novel interspersed with poetical pieces* (1790). As a writer with Welsh familial ties, Williams was aware of the folklore regarding Welsh bards as resisters of social injustice. In notes within a commonplace book, Thomas Gray recorded how when the English King Edward I conquered Wales he immediately "hanged up all their Bards, because they encouraged the Nation to rebellion".[7] The Welsh and Scottish poet Helen Maria Williams relishes the idea of the Celtic songwriter as inciter of revolution against English domination, and so she imagines an indigenous anti-colonial bard in *Peru* via her character Zamor. Though on one level evincing an innovative cross-cultural hybridity, Williams's construction of Zamor does risk the pitfalls of cultural appropriation. Zamor reflects what Robbie Richardson has recently identified as "a desire to appropriate the Indian into British subjectivity in the form of the hybrid IndianBriton".[8] Such a desire for appropriation does risk effacing the autonomy of real indigenous men and women and their concrete histories.

Williams envisioned Zamor, however, partly in hopes of bolstering the momentum of the actual indigenous revolution catalyzed in 1780 by a political leader with his own hybrid identity: the mestizo Túpac Amaru II. Political historian Sergio Serulnikov suggests,

> … to restore the meaning of the Tupamarista experience, we must do nothing less than recover the political dimension of the event, thinking of the place of the Andean peoples and their leaders not as somewhat passive agents of larger economic trends and systems of thought, but as what they really were: political actors. [9]

This is essentially what Williams was attempting to do through her 1784 poem with its cast of differentiated and strong Andean characters: Zamor, Aciloe, Manco-Capac, Cora, and Ataliba. Jessica Damián comments, "Williams contends that Andean sovereignty under Túpac Amaru would lead to liberation of the mines on the New Continent."[10] In writing *Peru*, Williams was not simply projecting Celtic aspirations onto imagined literary figures; by raising social consciousness regarding the suffering of Andean peoples, she was attempting to ameliorate the daily lived experiences of indigenous communities in South America.

In the late 1780s, as Williams's writing matured in the years leading up to the French Revolution, she further developed literary imagery of oppression and captivity that would later resurface in her prison writing. By 1788, her understanding of British complicity in colonial violence deepened with her

greater awareness of England's involvement in the slave trade. She came to realize what she had earlier naïvely celebrated as the "sublime"[11] sails of the British global economy could be attached to masts of slave ships. Melissa Bailes observes how in her elegy for James Cook, titled "The Morai" (1788), "Williams distinguishes Cook's Pacific encounters from both the brutality of Spanish conquest in the New World and, more audaciously, Britain's contemporary enslavement of Africans."[12] Written in the same year as her elegy for Cook, her *Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave Trade* (1788), juxtaposes imagery of "freedom" (line 94), found through escape or death, with tableaux of Africans "bound in hopeless chains!" (line 6). Her poem is a cry for "mercy" (47) towards the men, women, and children being trafficked across the Atlantic.

In 1790, after she had herself journeyed from England to France by choice, along with her mother and sister, Helen Maria Williams was drawn to aspects of the French Revolution that she saw as holding out hope for previously marginalized or oppressed communities around the globe. In her *Letters Written in France to a Friend in England* (1790), she depicted French revolutionary principles creating "a line of connection across the divided world".[13] As an anti-slavery activist, she admired Honoré Mirabeau's proposal for the abolition of the slave trade in 1790. Specifically, Williams appreciated his expression of sympathies for "the African race".[14] Her compassion for Africans held in slavery and her call for their freedom arose naturally from her Dissenting ties; religious Dissenters in England, such as the Quakers, had been at the forefront of abolitionist efforts since at least the mid-eighteenth century. Aware she may be perceived as disloyal to England due to her attraction to revolutionary Paris, in her *Letters* she queries:

… is it not something to be thankful for, that we exist at this enlightened period … ;when particular tenets of religious belief are no longer imputed as crimes; when the human mind has made as many important discoveries in morality as in science … ; when in short, (and you are not one of those who will suspect that I am not all the while a good Englishwoman) when one can witness an event so sublime as the French Revolution?[15]

Despite the risk of being no longer perceived as a "good Englishwoman", Williams voiced her attraction to multiple aspects of the revolution's early stages, including both a growth in religious tolerance and the prominence of Catholic female intellectuals in French society. Though Williams remained attached to "the particular tenets" of Presbyterian Dissent, she admired the prolific Catholic essayist, novelist, and multi-lingual translator Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis Sillery for her ability to speak about politics "in the spirit of philosophy".[16]

Due to her background as a Presbyterian Dissenter, Williams was keenly aware of past oppression enacted upon religious minorities by the Catholic majority in France, yet she still hoped French revolutionary principles

would unite people of varying religious convictions. Williams delighted in the sight of Catholics and Protestants gathering together for revolutionary festivities.[17] Hers was not a narrow form of Protestant dissent. She clearly admired the diversity of cultures, religions, ages, and genders present in the cosmopolitan gatherings of revolutionary Paris. Several critics have commented on Williams's labeling of herself as "a citizen of the world" in the first volume of her *Letters from France*. Deborah Kennedy, for example, presents this phrase as evidence of Williams's "internationalist position".[18] For Lisa Kasmer it illustrates her attempt to link all humanity through sympathetic bonds transcending national histories.[19] However, the connections between Williams's familial background as a religious Dissenter and her empathy for marginalized and vulnerable migrant communities around the globe have not been fully considered. What Adriana Craciun rightly identifies as "Williams's revolutionary cosmopolitanism"[20] and David Sigler labels with admiration as her "consistent cosmopolitanism"[21] has cultural roots in patterns of Dissenting cosmopolitanism.

During her return to London in 1791, after her initial trip to Paris, Williams hosted gatherings with fellow religious Dissenters of Scottish background, such as poet Joanna Baillie and her brother physician Matthew Baillie, as well as novelist Henry Mackenzie, at her Hampstead home on the outskirts of London. The Presbyterian minister who first encouraged Williams to publish her poetry, the Rev. Dr. Andrew Kippis, also attended these meetings. Kippis's sermons, published in 1791, intertwine Dissenting spirituality with practical topics, such as how to act justly with compassion. His *title Sermons on Practical Subjects* (1791) reflects this aim of lived application in the real, and increasingly politicized, communities of the early 1790s. Steven Blakemore notes that the French Revolution "revivified the ideological battles of the seventeenth century, allowing British dissidents to promote the old radical agenda (extended suffrage, parliamentary reform, and religious freedom) in the seemingly new language of natural rights".[22] Kippis does indeed use the language of rights in his sermons, and specifically when he addresses the topic of freedom. In a sermon on "The Advantage of Religious Knowledge", Kippis emphasizes the importance of rational enquiry in maintaining citizens'"sacred rights of conscience" and "the freedom of their minds".[23] In another sermon titled "The Blessedness Attending the Memory of the Just", Kippis extols "freedom of the soul".[24] In her letters of the 1790s, Williams was also expressing a keen commitment to liberty of conscience, inquiry, and religion, and a desire for compassionate justice, convictions which arose from her Dissenting background and, specifically, the mentorship of Kippis.[25] There are no extant detailed records of the conversations which took place in Williams's Hampstead home in 1791, but no doubt they would have touched on what she had seen in France and her desire to return.

Once settled permanently on the continent, Williams began hosting salons in her Parisian apartment. Her hospitality extended to guests who had been actively engaged in defending vulnerable communities around the world, such as the Venezuelan revolutionary general Francisco de Miranda. He had fought for independence from colonial rule in South America before arriving in Paris and visiting Williams. The culturally diverse and vibrant salons hosted by Williams anticipate the concept of cosmopolitan canopies articulated by twenty-first century sociologist Elijah Anderson. Anderson explains how within the cosmopolitan canopies of urban locations, "parties recover and regroup, come together, continue to model civility in public, and are constantly exposed to one another's humanity".[26] The challenges and delights of interactions across cultural and religious differences are key aspects of such sociable sites for Anderson. He continues: "The simple provocations, revelations, and pleasures diverse people find in one another's company induce them to return to the cosmopolitan canopy again and again."[27] Though Anderson has twenty-first century metropolises in mind, his words generate a very apt picture of Williams's salons in Paris, through which she recreated the Dissenting hospitality and sociability she had experienced in London.

In particular, the reality of Williams enjoying Francisco Miranda's conversation is clear when she recalls the early 1790s in her autobiographical writing. Her memoirs, translated by her nephew Charles Coquerel, contain the following reflection: "*J'avais connu Miranda dès mon arrive en France. Son caractère enthousiaste et ses aventures romanesques m'inspirèrent quelque intérêt. Je goûtais beaucoup de l'éloquence de sa conversation.*"[28] Within *Souvenirs de la Révolution Française* (1827), Williams declares a sociable and intellectual delight at encountering the eloquent conversation of Miranda and hearing about his action in the Americas. Her delight resonates with Elijah Anderson's idea of the "pleasures" to be found within the diverse urban company of cosmopolitan canopies. Williams's pleasurable imbibing of Miranda's stimulating conversation is depicted through the French word "*goûtais*", whose conjugation in the *imparfait* signifies a continuous tasting over a period of time, implying ongoing conversation through a series of social interactions. In *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2010), Kwame Anthony Appiah explains how we may deploy the idea of "conversation" critically "not only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the ideas and experiences of others".[29] He continues, "I stress the role of the imagination here because the encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves."[30] For Appiah, such imaginative encounters, whether through listening to another in a faceto-face conversation or via reading a novel, are truly cosmopolitan when they lead to a respectful acknowledgment of differences "whether national, religious, or something else".[31] This is what Dissenters such as Williams's Scottish mother had desired in Britain, to have their religious differences from a state church acknowledged, respected, and allowed.

Williams continued her practices of Dissenting cosmopolitan conversation while she was imprisoned during the Reign of Terror in 1793. Britain was at war with France from February 1793 onwards, and after the seizure of Toulon by British forces, the Committee of Public Safety ordered the imprisonment of all English subjects living in France.[32] On 12 October 1793, caught between two warring nations, Williams was arrested, along with her sister and mother, and subsequently sent to the Luxembourg prison. According to her letters, Williams shifted from excitedly surveying revolutionary festivity as a "sublime spectacle"[33] to ironically feeling like a "sad spectacle" as she climbed the Luxembourg's steps.[34] Mary Favret argues that Williams was engaged in performative theatricality, "making a spectacle of herself"[35] during the revolution. This is true of Williams's 1790 letters, but Williams's later phrase "sad spectacle" imbues her experience of involuntary imprisonment with self-deprecating irony. From within the prison, Williams continued to function simultaneously as a curious and open observer of revolutionary sociability and as a hospitable Dissenting *salonnière*. In a letter written from Switzerland in September, 1794, she remembers the remarkable socioeconomic, political, and ethnic diversity within the Luxembourg prison, recollecting, "Our prison was filled with a multitude of persons of different conditions, characters, opinions, and countries and seemed an epitome of the whole world."[36] How could Williams have become aware of the varying opinions of her prison mates if she was not engaging in "properly conducted" cosmopolitan conversations with them, in Appiah's terms? She recalls the prisoners eating, discussing ideas, and walking together. They shared "the comforts of the repast" and "conversed" as they would have in her Parisian salon. They also strolled together and appreciated aesthetic aspects of their prison, such as the "view of the gardens", gazing "from the windows on the walks below, where, perhaps, they recognized a relation or friend, who being denied the privilege of visiting the prison, had come to soothe them by a look or tear of sympathy".[37] Surveilled by their captors, the prisoners found relief in surveying the landscape outside. The prisoners' aesthetic experiences are tinged with sorrow and anxiety, however, as many were awaiting execution. Williams records the resilience of French sensibility and kindness but also reminds readers of her grief during what she labels "the days of my captivity".[38]

Williams's background as a religious Dissenter informed her willingness to secretly meet with two political prisoners – Marc-David Alba Lasource and Charles Alexis Pierre de Genlis Sillery – in order to encourage them as they faced probable execution and to hear them sing a hymn addressed to God. Presented with the reality of their own mortality, the men came together across religious differences to compose what was essentially their own elegy. Williams's translation of its lyrics into English forms a further bridge over cultural and linguistic differences. Imprisoned simply as a British

subject, Williams felt compassion for these two men who were explicitly accused as traitors, labeled Girondist enemies of the Jacobin French government. Lasource was a former Huguenot minister, trained in theology at the seminary of Lausanne, Switzerland. He had risen to the role of President of the French National Convention (April-May 1793) before the Girondists fell from favor. The Marquis de Sillery was a French Catholic military leader and politician who spoke on topics such as the rights of men and constitutionalism before the National Assembly and National Convention. He was married to Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis Sillery, a woman who, as we have seen, Williams admired as a public intellectual. Despite their captors' efforts to keep the political prisoners Sillery and Lasource hidden away and socially isolated, in a sort of solitary confinement, Williams found ways to converse with them. Her cosmopolitan capacity for attentive listening and sympathetic imagination was heightened by her confinement, which focused her attention and increased her powers of observation. Deborah Kennedy notes Williams's discovery of a "sociable community" in the Luxembourg prison,[39] and Favret remarks on the "story-telling, poem-writing, and singing" within the prison.[40] However, neither Kennedy nor Favret closely analyze Williams's transcribing and translating of the hymn that was collaboratively composed and sung by Lasource and Sillery.

Marc-David Alba Lasource and Charles Alexis Pierre de Genlis Sillery were kept in general isolation but allowed visitation by a nurse and a female friend who would secretly leave the door of their cell open, allowing for "moments of confidential conversation" with Williams in her cell.[41] Williams respectfully listened to the two men, allowing them space to articulate their fears and political perspectives, thus creating a space of cosmopolitan conversation akin to that defined by Kwame Appiah. In her later letters, Williams paints Sillery as a man of "fine taste" and "considerable talents for literature"[42] before representing the two men as collaborative composers of their hymn. She writes, "Sillery, who had a feeling heart, found devotion the most soothing refuge of affliction. He and La Source composed together a little hymn adapted to a sweet solemn air, which they called their evening service" (64). Williams recalls, "Every night before we parted they sung this simple dirge in a low tone to prevent their being heard in other apartments, which made it seem more plaintive."[43] They had to sing very quietly because they had been forbidden to interact with the other prisoners due to the political nature of their imprisonment. Their hymn is both a prayer and a funeral song, or what Williams terms a "dirge", written in anticipation of their own execution.[44]

The original French version of the hymn opens in short couplets of two to two and a half feet. It is a perfunctory petition addressed to God, akin to the stark *cris de coeur* found in the biblical psalms.

Calmez nos alarmes,
Pre^tez nous les armes,
Source de vrais biens,
Brisez nos liens! (Lasource & Sillery, lines 1–4)

The two men deploy militant language, asking God to replace their alarm with courage and weapons. But ultimately they express hope that God, as the source of true goodness, will break their chains. As a Dissenting Presbyterian, Williams was most likely attracted to the Psalmic quality of their hymn. Williams engaged with the psalms early on, in her two-volume 1786 *Poems*, which includes a verse paraphrase of Psalm 74. 16–17.[45] Scottish Presbyterianism, in particular, the heritage of her mother, included the regular practice of singing from a Psalter, a collection of metrically set Psalms in the English language.

Williams's translation politicizes the men's French hymn using iambic tetrameter couplets, the metrical form also deployed in her *Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave Trade*. Williams echoes not only the form of her earlier poem, but also its words and imagery, as she translates:

Calm all the tumults that invade
Our souls, and lend thy pow'rful aid,
Oh! source of mercy! sooth our pains,
And break, Oh! Break our cruel chains! (1–4)

In her *Poem on the Bill*, Williams uses the word "mercy" five times (it appears in her epigraph from Shakespeare, "The quality of mercy is not strained", and at lines 49, 102, 255, and 302). Her entire abolitionist poem is a petition to parliament to abolish slavery as a political act of mercy. Within it, Williams describes the bitterness of a "galling chain" (22) and later personifies slavery as a cruel woman who "...links the impious chain, / And calculates the price of pain" (153–54). Similar imagery appears in Williams's translation of Lasource and Sillery's hymn, which contains a call for "mercy!" (line 3) and a lament over the injustice of "cruel chains!"(line 4). One key difference lies in the appeal to the British parliament for help in *Poem on the Bill*, whereas in the Luxembourg hymn, both in the original and in Williams's translation, the speaker addresses God directly as the one who can break chains.

A tone of urgency continues in the second half of the first stanza in the original French hymn.

Entende les accens
De tes enfans
Dans les tourmens;
Ils souffrent, et leurs larmes
C'est leur seul encens! (5–9)

Lasource and Sillery ask God to listen to them as His children. They present themselves as uttering their accents or tones from a place of torment, suffering, and scarcity, with their tears being the only incense they can

offer. The mention of incense implies worship and praise of God, even in the midst of suffering, which increases the psalmic quality of the French hymn. The biblical psalms, like this hymn, juxtapose adoration and petition with lament. In Williams's translation, the speakers' communal identity as children of God is split into two singular categories: the captive and the mourner.
To thee the captive pours his cry,
To thee the mourner loves to fly;
The incense of our tears receive;
'Tis all the incense
we can give. (5–8)

The word "captive" gives a more political inflection to Williams's translation than the image of suffering children found in the original. Again, there are strong parallels to be found with Williams's anti-slavery *Poem on the Bill*, where she asks, "*Who* from his far-divided shore, / The half-expiring Captive bore?" (209–210). Later, she describes how, after the Atlantic Passage, "Chain'd on the beach the Captive stands" (250). Williams remained an ardent abolitionist her entire life, so when she translated Lasource and Sillery's words "*tes enfans*" into "the captive", she most likely had captives around the world in mind.

In the second stanza of the French Luxembourg hymn, the men continue to address God:
Prenez notre défense,
Grand Dieu de l'innocence!
Près de toi toujours
Elle trouve son secours;
Tu connais nos coeurs,
Et les auteurs
De nos malheurs;
D'un fort qui t'offense
Détrui la rigeur.
(Lasource & Sillery, lines 10–16).
Here the hymn shifts to a more intimate tone, acknowledging divine omniscience regarding each man's heart and the hearts of his enemies. Williams translates:
Eternal pow'r, our cause defend,
Oh God! of innocence the friend!
Near thee forever she resides,
In thee forever she confides.
Thou know'st the secrets of the breast,
Thou knows'tth'oppressor and th'opprest:
Do thou our wrongs with pity see,
Avert a doom offending thee! (9–16)

Reflecting her secret and confidential conversations with Lasource and Sillery, Williams weaves in references to "secrets" confided to God in prayer. Also, by

once again using much more explicitly socio-political language, Williams highlights the hypocrisy of those claiming to forward the cause of *liberté* while oppressing others. By changing "*auteurs*",or "authors",to "oppressors" she points a challenging finger at those responsible for Lasource and Sillery's imprisonment and eventual execution. The tone of her translation is satiric, in the tradition of Juvenalian satire, expressive of righteous indignation.

The French hymn moves from a petition for the breaking of chains to an acceptance of divine sovereignty.
Quand la tyrannie
Frappe notre vie,
Fiers de notre fort,
Méprisant la mort,
Nous te bénissons. (Lasource & Sillery, lines 19–23)

Lasource and Sillery present their execution as inevitable in these lines; a literal translation would be: "When tyranny / Strikes our lives, / Proud of our strength, / Scorning death, / We will bless God." The lines are almost Stoic in their resignation. Williams adds ambiguity by changing "when" to "should"; she writes, "But should the murd'rer's arm prevail,/Should tyranny our lives assail …" (17–18), leaving room for the possibility of freedom. The conclusion of her translated hymn matches the French almost exactly, however. Lasource and Sillery had expressed belief that the future of France would vindicate them, exclaiming, "la patrie / Vengera nos noms!" (26–27); Williams simply translates this as: "Our country will avenge our names!" (24). Sadly, Lasource and Sillery were executed by guillotine on 31 Oct. 1793.

The combination of mournful lament with yearning for freedom and justice surfaces again within the sonnets Williams composed for inclusion in her translation of her friend Bernardin de Saint-Pierre'snovel *Paul et Virginie* (1788) as *Paul and Virginia* (1795). There is a subtle yet powerful Psalmic allusion in one of these sonnets. Williams would later remember how in prison, "often did I wish 'for the wings of a dove, that I might flee away and be at rest!,'" quoting from Psalm 55.7.46 While held within the claustrophobic confines of a prison, Williams took comfort in picturing the freedom of a bird's flight, and she wove this avian imagery into one of her sonnets.

"Sonnet to the White Bird of the Tropic", one of the nine sonnets Williams inserted into *Paul and Virginia*, contains expansive images of flight over a vast and brightly lit ocean. Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* is set on the island of Mauritius, off the Southeast coast of Africa, and Williams maintains this setting. Her depiction of the dynamic, even exhilarating, flight of a migratory bird over Southern waters exists in tension with the physical reality from within which she imagined such flight, the inside of a confining prison. Critics generally agree Williams's Paul and Virginia was completed during her time of imprisonment.[47] The French author of Paul et Virginie was one of the last people Williams

saw before she was arrested. She was "drinking tea" and conversing with Saint-Pierre on the evening of 11 Oct. 1793, when she received news that the English in France would soon be taken prisoner.[48] In her preface to *Paul and Virginia*, Williams hopes the "poetical productions … interspersed in this work"[49] will be met with the "indulgence"[50] of the public, since they were "written under such peculiar circumstances; not composed in the calm of literary leisure, or in pursuit of literary fame; but amidst the turbulence of the most cruel sensations, in order to escape awhile from overwhelming misery".[51] Williams's deployment of the word "escape" here may allude to her desire to physically escape from prison, as well as referring to imaginative escape via the construction of poetic imagery. When she reprinted the sonnets in her 1823 collection Poems on Various Subjects, Williams added a footnote stating the "sonnets were inserted … in a translation I made … while I was in prison during the reign of terror, and which served to cheat the days of captivity of their weary length".[52] Williams presents her acts of translation and poetic composition as a sort of light shining in the darkness of her imprisonment.

It is not surprising, then, that one of the sonnets included in her translation, "Sonnet: To the White Bird of the Tropic", opens with imagery of joyful movement through intense sunlight. Williams addresses the entire poem to the bird.

Bird of the Tropic! thou, who lov'st to stray
Or mark'st the bounds which torrid beams confine
By thy averted course, that shuns the ray
Oblique, enamour'd of sublimer day –
Oft on yon cliff thy folded plumes recline
And drop those snowy feathers Indians twine,
To crown the warrior's brow with honours gay –
O'er trackless ocean what impels thy wing?
Does no soft instinct in thy soul prevail?
No sweet affection to thy bosom cling,
And bid thee oft thy absent nest bewail?
Yet thou again to that dear spot can spring –
But I my long-lost home no more shall hail.

This sonnet alludes to Psalm 55's image of freedom in a bird's flight. Williams's speaker directly addresses the white bird, admiring its bold travel into vast spaces, its prospect view from atop a cliff, and the gifting of its feathers to indigenous warriors. The White-Tailed Tropicbird, subspecies of which are found not only in Mauritius, but also in Mexico, and as far North as Bermuda, is likely the bird upon which Williams has based her sonnet. By choosing a species so widely dispersed across Southern nations, and connecting its feathers to Indigenous cultural practices in the Americas, Williams invites readers to imagine its Trans-Atlantic migration.

Williams quickly follows up with a series of queries posed to the bird, which double as questions to her own self. The single and adventurous

Williams, who left her nation of birth to travel into previously unknown cultural spheres, wonders, via her speaker, what impels such movement into “trackless” spaces. The migratory and cosmopolitan Williams questions the bird’s apparent lack of domestic virtue, wondering that no feminine “soft instinct” or “sweet affection” ties its heart to its nest. Perhaps thinking of her childhood in Berwick-upon-Tweed, Williams wonders that the bird is not homesick after travelling such distances. The sonnet ends on a note of lament, with the speaker’s exilic state reflecting Williams’s own inability to leave France and return home to Britain. Louise Joy suggests Williams transformed Saint-Pierre’s novel “into a troubled confession of her own suffering”.[53] The final line of “Sonnet to the White Bird” is indeed an example of such transformation. The admission of melancholy homesickness expressed in this line exists alongside experiences of momentary imaginative freedom while crossing bodies of salt water and picturing Indigenous warriors in the Americas.

Williams would return to contemplating South American Indigenous cultural resistance to oppression after she was released from prison and left France for an approximately six-month stay in Switzerland. Towards the end of November 1793, the efforts of Athanase Coquerel, Williams’s sister’s fiancé, secured the release of the Williams women from the English convent where they were held after having been transferred there from the Luxembourg prison.[54] While she travelled through the Swiss Alps, Williams’s cosmopolitan imagination was led back to the Andes, and she pictured “the immense tract of that rich and violated continent, where the Peruvian, stealing from the glance of his tyrant, hies to the native circle, joins in the melancholy dance, and laments, with tears, the departed splendor of his country”.[55] This turn to Peruvian cultural activity recalls her figure of the bard Zamor. The representation of lamentation and tears may have been influenced by her experience of hearing the revolutionary Girondists Lasource and Sillery sing their political hymn. In a long footnote, Williams writes:

When in my poem on Peru, one of my earliest productions, I fondly poured forth the wish that the natives of that once happy country might regain their freedom, it seemed rather the illusive dream of fancy than founded on any solid basis of hope. That revolution had not taken place, which appears destined to break the fetters of mankind in whatever region they are found, and which transforms what was once the vision of poetic enthusiasm into the sober certainty of expectation.[56]

By 1794 Williams’s belief in liberté had been shaken but not extinguished, and in a radically trans-Atlantic move, she connected her continued commitment to revolutionary principles to her persisting hope for the future freedom of Indigenous Peruvians.

Williams had kept such commitments and hopes alive during her time of imprisonment in the Luxembourg by expressing her Dissenting

cosmopolitanism in both generous hospitality and imaginative composition. She listened to her fellow prisoners, across linguistic and religious differences, transcribed Sillery and Lasource's French hymn, and began her translation of Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*. In the midst of her experience of captivity, she continued to exercise the freedom of thought, conscience, and expression modeled to her by the Dissenting minister Andrew Kippis. Paradoxically, the very strategies her captors had intended to isolate, silence, and restrict her and others, such as Lasource and Sillery, actually prompted her further expressions of cosmopolitan social consciousness and her nurturing of cosmopolitan canopies, both actual and imaginary. She created vibrant and generative spaces of cross-cultural exchange both physically in prison and conceptually in her writing by supporting a freedom of movement between the cells and freedom of speech in Lasource and Sillery's hymn. This same freedom of movement and expression is conveyed through her own original prison verse, especially her "Sonnet to the White Bird of the Tropic". Williams does not end on a triumphant note, however. Her sonnet is embedded within a prose narrative reflecting on the continued existence of slavery in the French colonies; it contains reference to exile and ends with a yearning for home in tension with Williams's own fascinatingly cosmopolitan time of captivity.

Notes

1. Helen Maria Williams, *Letters from France*, Vol. 4 (London: G.G. & J. Robinson, 1793), p. 147.
2. Hutton, Catherine, "A Letter to Mrs. Andre, April 15, 1792", *Reminiscences of a Gentlewoman of the Last Century: Letters of Catherine Hutton* (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers, 1891), p. 110.
3. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings of Certain Societies in London Relative to That Event* (London: J. Dodsley, 1790), p. 99.
4. Helen Maria Williams, *Peru, a Poem in Six Cantos* (London: T. Cadell, 1784). All subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition.
5. Juan Sánchez, "Helen Maria Williams's Peru and the Spanish Legacy of the British Empire", *Romanticism's Debatable Lands*, ed. Claire Lamont and Michael Rossington (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 178.
6. See Deborah Kennedy, *Helen Maria Williams and the Age of Revolution* (Lewisburg: Bucknell U P, 2002), p. 167; Patrick Vincent's "Introduction" to his edition of Helen Maria Williams's, *A Tour in Switzerland* (Geneva: Slatkine, 2011), p. 45.
For further consideration of Williams's sympathetic portrayal of Catholic social consciousness across lines of religious differences, see Tonya Moutray's account of her imprisonment in *Refugee Nuns: The French Revolution and British Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
7. Thomas Gray as quoted in R.W. Ketton-Cremer, *Thomas Gray: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2011), p. 133.
8. Robbie Richardson, *The Savage and the Modern Self: North American Indians in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2018), p. 37. Though Richardson addresses the problem of representing the

First Nations of North America in the eighteenth century, his point still applies to William's representation of South American indigenous communities.
9. Sergio Serulnikov, *Revolution in the Andes; The Age of Túpac Amaru* (Durham: Duke U P, 2013), p. 12.
10. Jessica Damián, "Helen Maria Williams's Personal Narrative of Travels from *Peru* (1784) to *Peruvian Tales* (1823)", *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 3.2 (2007): par 15 <http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue32/damian.htm>.
11. Helen Maria Williams, *Ode on the Peace* (London: T. Cadell, 1783), p. 167.
12. Melissa Bailes, *Questioning Nature: British Women's Scientific Writing and Literary Originality, 1750–1830* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2017).
13. Helen Maria Williams, *Letters Written in France, in the Summer of 1790, to a Friend in England* (London: T. Cadell, 1790), p. 222. See Juan Sánchez's strong critique of this image as a colonialist celebration of the expansion of British international trade in "Helen Maria Williams's Peru", p. 179.
14. Williams, *Letters Written in France*, p. 48.
15. Williams, *Letters Written in France*, p. 65.
16. Williams, *Letters Written in France*, p. 36.
17. Williams, *Letters Written in France*, p. 64.
18. Kennedy, p. 56.
19. Lisa Kasmer, *Novel Histories: British Women Writing History, 1760–1830* (Fairleigh Dickinson U P, 2012), p. 77.
20. Adriana Craciun, *British Women Writers and the French Revolution: Citizens of the World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 9.
21. David Sigler, "'The Ocean of Futurity, Which Has No Boundaries': The Deconstructive Politics of Helen Maria Williams's Translation of *Paul and Virginia*", *European Romantic Review*, 23.5 (2012): p. 576.
22. Blakemore, Stephen, *Crisis in Representation: Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1997), p. 15.
23. Andrew Kippis, *Sermons on Practical Subjects* (London: T. Cadell, 1791), p. 25.
24. Kippis, *Sermons*, pp. 409–10.
25. See also Orianne Smith's acknowledgment of this mentorship role, and the importance of Kippis as a particularly Presbyterian role model, in *Romantic Women Writers, Revolution, and Prophecy: Rebellious Daughters, 1786–1826* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), p. 100.
26. Elijah Anderson, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011), p. 273.
27. Anderson, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy*, p. 273.
28. Helen Maria Williams, *Souvenirs de la Révolution Française, traduit de l'Anglais* (Paris: Dondey-Dupré, 1827), p. 97.
29. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), p. 85.
30. Appiah, p. 85.
31. Appiah, p. 85.
32. Jack Fruchtman, Jr., "Introduction" to *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France* (New York:

Peter Lang, 1997), p. 17.
33. Williams, *Letters Written in France*, p. 2.

34. Williams, *Letters Containing a Sketch of the Politics of France*, ed. Jack Fruchtman (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), p. 52.
35. Mary Favret, "Spectatrice as Spectacle: Helen Maria Williams at Home in the Revolution", *Studies in Romanticism*, 32.2 (1993): 275.
36. Williams, *Letters Containing a Sketch*, p. 55.
37. Williams, *Letters Containing a Sketch*, p. 56.
38. Williams, *Letters Containing a Sketch*, p. 61.
39. Kennedy, p. 111.
40. Favret, p. 293.
41. Williams, *Letters Containing a Sketch*, p. 63.
42. Williams, *Letters Containing a Sketch*, p. 63.
43. Williams, *Letters Containing a Sketch*, p. 64.
44. The hymn and its translation are printed on pages 64–66 of *Letters Containing a Sketch*.
45. For analysis of poems by Williams responding to the Psalms and Isaiah, see Natasha Duquette's, *Veiled Intent: Dissenting Women's Aesthetic Approach to Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2016).
46. Williams, *Letters Containing a Sketch*, p. 61.
47. Gary Kelly, for example, claims definitively: "During her imprisonment Williams translated her friend Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's novella*, Paul et Virginie*", *Women, Writing, and Revolution, 1790–1827* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), p. 56. See also Vincent, p. 22.
48. Williams*, Letters Containing a Sketch*, p. 50.
49. Helen Maria Williams, "Preface" to *Paul and Virginia* (London: G.G. & J. Robinson, 1795), p. x.
50. Williams, "Preface", p. xi.
51. Williams, "Preface", pp. xi–xii.
52. Helen Maria Williams, *Poems on Various Subjects, with Introductory Remarks on the Present State of Science and Literature in France* (London: Whittaker, 1823), p. 211.
53. Louise Joy, "Emotions in Translation: Helen Maria Williams and 'Beauties Peculiar to the English Language'", *Studies in Romanticism*, 50.1 (2011): 161.
54. Jack Fruchtman, Jr., "Introduction" to *Letters Containing a Sketch*, p. 9.
55. Helen Maria Williams, *A Tour in Switzerland* (London: G. G. & J. Robinson, 1798), pp. 126–27.
56. Williams, *A Tour in Switzerland*, p. 127.

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Notes on contributor

Natasha Duquette is Professor of English at Tyndale University College in Toronto. Her interest in intersections of religion, literature, gender, and print culture inform her monograph *Veiled Intent: Dissenting Women's Aesthetic Approach to Biblical Interpretation* (Pickwick 2016). She is co-editor of *Jane Austen and the Arts: Elegance, Propriety, and Harmony* (Lehigh University Press, 2013) and editor of *Sublimer Aspects: Interfaces between Literature, Aesthetics, and Theology* (Cambridge Scholars,

2007). Currently she is serving as editor-in-chief for *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Romantic-Era Women's Writing*.