

LITTLE-KNOWN DOCUMENTS

New Light on Lucy Terry Prince

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Lucy Terry Prince (b. 1724–26; d. 1821), the earliest known Black American poet, is thought to have been published only thirty years after her death.¹ Her sole surviving poem, the combat ballad “Bars Fight,” first appeared in an article by Josiah Gilbert Holland in the *Springfield Daily Republican* (also home to most of the few poems that Emily Dickinson published in her lifetime) on 20 November 1854 (Holland, “History” 1), then was reprinted the following year in Holland’s book about Western Massachusetts. Across fourteen couplets, “Bars Fight” memorializes an ambush by indigenous Abenaki in 1746 against white residents of Deerfield, Massachusetts, the town where Prince lived. The attack claimed the lives of Eleazer Hawks and four others known personally to Prince, each of whom is acknowledged in her elegy. Much anthologized since its appearance in 1855, this poem has been called “the first (or first known) work of African American literature” and, since it is believed Prince recited rather than recorded it, a founding piece of American oral poetry (Young, Introduction xlvi).

Two newly surfaced excerpts from the 8 December 1818 issue of the *Hampshire Gazette and Public Advertiser* shed significant new light on the circumstances of Prince’s composition, a source of much speculation among scholars of early American verse. In a long attack on the overwrought language of a verse pamphlet called *The Tomb-stone* (1818), the *Gazette*’s anonymous reviewer inserts an aside:

We are here forcibly reminded of a verse from the “Fightiad,” a poem long since written by an African poetess and the most of which is lost.

Colonel Ephraim he,
An Indian see;
Was kill’d and died immediately:
He was kill’d outright,
And died immediately,
Before he had time to fight.

We beg leave to state, for the consolation of the literary world, that the fragments of this poem, that have been rescued from destruction, are in

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the hands of a learned friend with a view to publication.

We cannot avoid quoting another parallel passage from an anonymous manuscript we have had the pleasure of seeing.

'Twas nigh unto Sam Dickinson's mill,
Where the Indians five men did kill.
(Review of *The Tomb-stone*)

The stanza on Colonel Ephraim appears to have become lines 9 through 12 of the published 1855 "Bars Fight":

Eleazer Hawks was killed outright,
Before he had time to fight,—
Before he did the Indians see,
Was shot and killed immediately.
(qtd. in Holland, *History* 2: 360)

But the subjects differ. Although Eleazer Hawks died in the 1746 ambush of Deerfield, the 1818 stanza documents a casualty of the French and Indian War almost a decade later. Colonel Ephraim Williams (b. 1715) died in 1755 at the Battle of Lake George, in New York, in a surprise attack by Native American troops who had allied with the French. Prince's theme in the 1818 stanza matches that of "Bars Fight": a combat elegy to a fallen Massachusetts acquaintance. (In 1756, Colonel Ephraim's brother Elijah officiated Lucy's wedding to Abijah Prince.) The two excerpts also share a current of anti-indigenous sentiment, a sentiment made more evident in the 1855 version, in phrases such as "awful creatures."² The events of the 1818 stanza, however, take place nine years after and eighty miles northwest of the incident "Bars Fight" documents.

Further differences include meter and rhyme. The 1855 "Bars Fight" scans in uniform tetrameter, whereas the 1818 stanza unfolds in a loose trimeter with more pronounced repetitions that emulate oral recitation. Transcribed above as line breaks, these repetitions turn the stanza very nearly into a six-line stave (complete with AAABAB scheme), the medieval form revived by Robert Burns. This form filled Burns's best-selling *Poems, Chiefly in*

the Scottish Dialect (1786), a volume available in New England as early as 1788 with an appendix of further six-line staves by his forebear Robert Fergusson.

As for the couplet about Sam Dickinson, a slaveowner whose mill marked the site of the 1746 attack (Gerzina 77, 82; Katz 184), these lines were known among oral historians, perhaps from the review of *The Tomb-stone* excerpted above. Though it does not appear in the 1855 "Bars Fight," the couplet has been discussed before now. One nineteenth-century historian treats the couplet as evidence that Prince composed an alternative version of her famous ballad (Sheldon 56; see also Kaplan and Kaplan 238). More recently, because of its similarities in meter, tone, subject, and setting, the couplet has been construed as a piece of *mise-en-scène* originally belonging to, but ultimately omitted from, "Bars Fight" as it appeared in 1855 (Katz 184).

Though anonymous, Prince's excerpter deserves some attention. The *Hampshire Gazette* had recently begun a satirical review series under the pseudonym "Quatre" on 10 November 1818. The reviews in this semiregular column resemble the review by Prince's excerpter in its verbiage, sense of humor, and concerns. This excerpter, it seems, maintained an ongoing relationship with the paper. Though the *Gazette* excerpted Prince before Holland's birth (1819), a letter in Holland's hand from 1857, which has recently resurfaced at private sale, illustrates Holland's close ties to "my neighbor of the Hampshire Gazette" (Holland, Manuscript letter). This stray reference helps illustrate the regional coterie of "learned friends" that sustained interest in Prince's work across generations. That Prince's stanza has been "rescued from destruction" seems less a revelation of ill intent against her manuscript than an aggrandizement of the literary antiquarian's task.³ As for the *Gazette* reviewer's motives, the satirical tone makes it difficult to parse his estimation of Prince's literary value. His copious comparative quotations of Cicero, Virgil, Gay, and Cowper, all deployed to belittle the plainspoken *Tomb-stone*, also outmuscle the Prince quotations by sheer force of canon. Seen

from another angle, however, that the reviewer is “forcibly reminded” of Prince might signal only a kinship of subject rather than an equal target for ridicule. Like the alleged “Fightiad,” *The Tomb-stone* elegizes a regional figure, in this case Ezekiel Reed of Woburn, Massachusetts, who disappeared in 1786. The description of the killing of Reed, who in *The Tomb-stone* “[w]as by two sharpers slain,” might simply have echoed Prince’s passive-voice narration (*Tomb-stone* 4).

These new excerpts make clear that Prince was published long before Holland’s book, indeed in her own lifetime. They open several questions about her literary output that have been hitherto obscured. For starters, the Ephraim Williams stanza suggests “Bars Fight” might have been only one of numerous Prince compositions, one of several “parallel” texts, to use the reviewer’s word, that have yet to resurface. Here is evidence, then, for the argument of Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, who, having discovered Prince’s receipts for writing paper purchased in the 1750s, concludes that “it is impossible to believe that she didn’t write other poems” (80). The *Gazette*’s title for the lost manuscript supports this possibility: the classical suffix of the “Fightiad” hints at a colonial theater greater than the local setting of the surviving “Bars Fight.” The excerpts provide new information about the poet herself, as well. It is often speculated, for instance, that Prince composed no later than the 1740s.⁴ Given the reference to the 1755 Battle of Lake George and the specificity of the six-line stave, a form not popularly available until the late 1780s, it is possible that she was composing and revising throughout her long life. Though the reviewer meant to stress the manuscript’s age, the fact that Prince’s poem was “long since written” by 1818 would still seem to accommodate composition in those later decades. With this alternative time line in mind, Prince’s standing as the inaugurator of Black American verse begins to wobble. How sure can we be that Prince memorialized Hawks or Williams before December 1760, the month the enslaved poet Jupiter Hammon penned his first work, *An Evening Thought* (pub. 1761)? In her search for a dignified but homespun epic form, it

is possible that Prince, through private reading or public auditing, with or without the help of an amanuensis, deliberately borrowed a rusticated Scottish poetic form and was therefore engaged with the broader pre-Romantic vanguard that buoyed the antiquarian turn of James Macpherson, Thomas Chatterton, Fergusson, and Burns throughout the eighteenth century.

Less welcome considerations await, however. The amputated nature of Prince’s excerpts, the references to manuscript loss, and the implication that her early sestet on Ephraim Williams was silently sanded down into a quatrain on a different subject in a different meter, renew old fears about the fortunes of a Black poet in a predominantly white literary scene. Perhaps Prince’s anthologists, editors, or amanuenses, such as the “learned friends” who collected her lines, or the *Gazette* reviewer who excerpted them in 1818, or perhaps the Deerfield historian Pliny Arms who privately recorded the first known complete “Bars Fight” in the 1840s, or perhaps Holland himself when he prepared his publications in the 1850s, saw fit to withhold, condense, or intervene in Prince’s work, “the most of which,” the *Hampshire Gazette* reminds us, “is lost.”⁵

NOTES

1. For Prince’s vital dates, which are commonly misrepresented, see Gerzina xiv.
2. Harris reads the tone of such phrases as a satire on white colonial attitudes (179–81).
3. Similar “rescues” occur in the period’s seminal verse anthologies. See Percy 3: viii; Johnson 1: 349.
4. For this speculation in recent years, see Young, *African American Poetry* 1013; Hutchins and Smith 16. Wisely, Young sequences his anthology by publication date, a decision that allows for uncertainties of composition.
5. My thanks to the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association for assistance in dating Arms’s manuscript.

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