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Scholarly debates about slavery in English North America have a tendency to vacillate between two poles: the emergence of slavery was either an “unthinking decision” or the result of a carefully executed nefarious plot. In a historical narrative in which the indentured servitude of English men and women eventually gave way to a labor force dominated by enslaved Africans, the prevailing view is that English colonizers were innocents abroad. The English were aghast at Spanish atrocities in the New World and were determined to bring a kinder, gentler brand of colonialism to the territories they controlled. English innocence, says conventional scholarly wisdom, included a general ignorance about slavery. Slavery was dead in the British Isles, having ended in the fourteenth century, and English people had little or no experience with slavery or enslavement.¹ Michael Guasco dispenses with this comfortable mythology about slaves and Englishmen in this fresh look at what the English actually knew about slavery as they ventured into the Atlantic. English people, Guasco argues, knew a lot about slavery, and their understandings of slavery shaped their colonialism. “Slaves and slavery were everywhere” (5) in the many worlds that English people traversed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Guasco elaborates on this deceptively simple statement in a book whose principal achievement is to question almost every aspect of what we think we know about English people and slavery. Guasco’s Atlantic is actually global in its reach; his wandering Englishmen encounter, write about, and judge slaveries in Russia, the Ottoman Empire, India, (present-day) Indonesia, China, Japan, the west coast of Africa, Mexico, and South America. This striking globalism in English observations of slavery leads Guasco to question the utility of the slave society/society dichotomy, requiring readers to take “seriously the idea that,

even without plantations and even without large numbers of bound Africans living in their midst, slavery mattered” (9). Guasco’s broad source base includes travel narratives, captivity narratives, tracts, treatises, court records, letters, laws, and legal cases. In casting such a wide net, Guasco is able to offer a sustained treatment of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (also unusual for a history of slavery in the Anglophone Atlantic).

Guasco’s book opens with an exploration of medieval English history, a context not often explored in the history of slavery. Guasco helpfully outlines the origins of the English myth of England’s unique freedom and in the process uncovers a complex heritage. Using sources seldom consulted by historians of slavery (including the twelfth-century chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*), Guasco grounds sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English ideas about freedom and unfreedom in an understanding of the distant past. English people were not necessarily antislavery in the way that term came to operate in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but they were uncomfortable with hereditary bondage. Guasco writes, “The history of domestic bondage in the sixteenth century highlights the paradoxical relationship between Englishness and slavery, for what offended most during this period was not the propriety of slavery but the arbitrary nature of a system of human bondage based entirely on descent” (32). Penal slavery had a positive reputation among Englishmen as well—its victims deserved it for their transgressions, but it also offered redemptive possibilities.

The English were less sanguine about slavery, though, when their own were caught up in arbitrary or undeserved enslavement. One of the many strengths of this book is Guasco’s sustained engagement with the enslavement of thousands of Englishmen in the Mediterranean. Guasco writes, “The ease with which an Englishman could be turned into a slave was a devastating contrast to the native liberties and freedoms English writers were otherwise so inclined to celebrate” (124). The English experience of enslavement in the Mediterranean was so arbitrary (as opposed to penal slavery) that it reinforced the idea that “Englishmen were, in a pure state of nature, free” (128). English people therefore had widespread direct experience with enslavement. The success of schemes spearheaded by the crown or the Bishops to raise money to redeem enslaved Englishmen shows how deeply slavery had penetrated into the nation’s psyche. Guasco’s book, therefore, fits into a growing historiography that integrates Mediterranean slaveries into narratives of Atlantic slavery, a development that promises to transform how historians approach what Guasco terms “Slavery before ‘Slavery’” (195)—that elusive moment in which English people held enslaved Indians and Africans but were not fully committed to plantation agriculture.
In a context in which English people were quite familiar with slavery, their encounter with slavery in Africa seems unremarkable. As Guasco points out, “early English impressions of slavery in Africa during this period were not especially distinctive in a comparative context” (78). Englishmen saw slavery and experienced slavery globally, so they were not shocked to find that Africans practiced slavery or were enslaved themselves. There were, of course, sixteenth-century English experiments with slave trading (including John Hawkins’s famous voyages in the 1560s), and while the slave trade remained impractical, the English “did not necessarily find slavery to be particularly disagreeable” (71). Instead, enslaved Africans might have served as allies, prisoners, laborers, and even slaves, as the English harried Spanish settlements in the Caribbean.

Some of Guasco’s narrative here is reminiscent of Edmund S. Morgan’s *American Slavery, American Freedom*, which opens with English liberationist ideology and Anglo-African cooperation in the sixteenth century. But Guasco provides much-needed nuance to these old stories. “Africans,” Guasco notes, “were generally the first to be ransomed, set adrift, sacrificed, traded, or resold to ensure that the larger goals of England’s maritime enterprises were achieved” (118). English views of slavery and enslaved people were nothing if not complicated: English people could see themselves as the liberators of enslaved Africans while simultaneously exploiting and enslaving Africans.

In focusing so resolutely on the sixteenth century, Guasco has made a convincing case that the only way to understand English colonialism after the founding of Jamestown in 1607 is to thoroughly understand English colonialism before 1607. After reading Guasco’s analysis, the penal slavery of Thomas Dale’s *Lawes Divine Morall and Martiall* (1612) or the temporary enslavement of Englishmen in Bermuda makes more sense. As Guasco notes, “Virginia was unexceptional in its willingness to threaten slavery” (161) to other Englishmen.

Gusaco’s arguments on Indian enslavement are less convincing. “Anglo-American colonists,” he writes, “had little interest in exploiting Indians for their labor” (181). Yet much of the evidence available to historians suggests that English colonists had a great deal of interest in using native people for labor. After all, John Smith put the werowance of Paspahegh and many of his men in chains and put them to work in English fields in 1609.2 The enslavement of native people—both temporary and permanent—was routine in the English colonial world. Guasco is surely correct that “Indian slavery, too, should be neither taken for granted nor simply viewed as either an early example or an extension

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of the enslavement of African peoples” (193). Yet Indians and Africans certainly could also claim a shared experience that was quite different from the penal slavery endured by some English colonists—Africans and Indians were not enslaved as punishment for crimes but because they could provide labor in infant colonies.

Guasco also wrestles with the question of what the arrival of the first Africans in English colonies meant, including the now-iconic “20 and odd Negroes” (3) who came to Virginia in 1619. As Guasco notes, the story of 1619 has been made into an apocryphal tale that explains “the beginnings of the English embrace of racial hierarchies and a commitment to plantation slavery” (197). But it is also “not an especially transparent moment in the early history of the English Atlantic world” (197). Indeed, there are very few, if any, transparent moments in the early history of slavery. The arrival of the first Africans, enslaved or otherwise, in English colonies thus carried many meanings, some of them mutually contradictory. English people knew about slavery, thought about it, observed it, and experienced it. And then, in the New World, they experimented with it, despite their own commitments to an English understanding of freedom and their skepticism about slavery when they observed it in other places.

Guasco’s Englishmen, then, were certainly not ignorant about slavery’s existence and potential. The achievement of Slaves and Englishmen is that future historians of slavery, both in the Atlantic and around the globe, must carefully consider the prehistory of Atlantic slavery and grapple with its rich and complicated intellectual history.