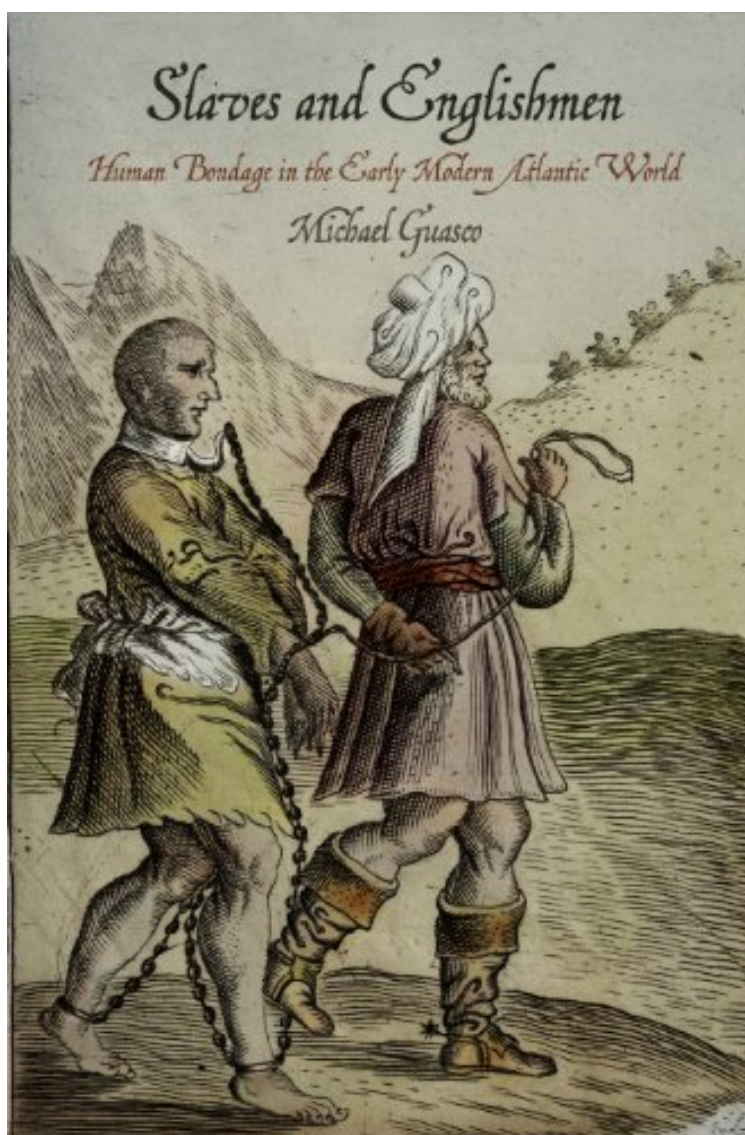


(Library ebook) Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World (The Early Modern Americas)

## Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World (The Early Modern Americas)

Michael Guasco

ePub | \*DOC | audiobook | ebooks | Download PDF



DOWNLOAD



+

READ ONLINE

#1749005 in Books 2014-01-17Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 1.10 x 6.37 x 9.351, 1.44 #File Name: 0812245784328 pages | File size: 48.Mb

**Michael Guasco : Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World (The Early Modern Americas)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised

## Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World (The Early Modern Americas):

Technically speaking, slavery was not legal in the English-speaking world before the mid-seventeenth century. But long before race-based slavery was entrenched in law and practice, English men and women were well aware of the various forms of human bondage practiced in other nations and, in less systematic ways, their own country. They understood the legal and philosophic rationale of slavery in different cultural contexts and, for good reason, worried about the possibility of their own enslavement by foreign Catholic or Muslim powers. While opinions about the benefits and ethics of the institution varied widely, the language, imagery, and knowledge of slavery were a great deal more widespread in early modern England than we tend to assume. In wide-ranging detail, *Slaves and Englishmen* demonstrates how slavery shaped the ways the English interacted with people and places throughout the Atlantic world. By examining the myriad forms and meanings of human bondage in an international context, Michael Guasco illustrates the significance of slavery in the early modern world before the rise of the plantation system or the emergence of modern racism. As this revealing history shows, the implications of slavery were closely connected to the question of what it meant to be English in the Atlantic world.

"With an admirable global perspective and a breathtaking array of sources, Michael Guasco recasts the history of the English experience with slavery." Alison Games, Georgetown University "Guasco has done terrific work here, laying a strong foundation for future research. . . . A welcome addition to the literature on American slavery." *American Historical* "A stimulating book. . . . Guasco presents a gamut of events and institutions that rendered slavery familiar to the English within and without." *Journal of Southern History* About the Author Michael Guasco is Professor of History at Davidson College. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Introduction The Problem of Slavery in Pre-Plantation America Perhaps it is best to begin with the familiar: In 1619, a Flemish privateer called the *White Lion* dropped anchor off Point Comfort at the eastern extremity of the English settlement in Virginia. Captain Jope and his men had suffered greatly on their return voyage from the West Indies and when the ship arrived in the Chesapeake the pirates were short on palatable food and potable water. It may be that Jope and his men had been at sea longer than anticipated or that his provisions had spoiled as a result of exposure to rough weather or rotted as a result of improper storage. These things happen. Of course, Jope and his men could also have been unusually hungry and thirsty because of the extra mouths they had stored away somewhere in the belly of their ship, for one Englishman reported that on board were "not any thing but 20. and odd Negroes, w[hich] the Governo[r] and Cape Marchant bought for victualle." By the time he departed, Jope had fresh provisions and water and had reduced the number of mouths on board by striking a bargain with the leaders of the English settlement, an exchange that resulted in the first documented arrival of African peoples in Virginia. For Captain Jope and his men, it was clear sailing as they set out for familiar European waters. For the colonists and the newly purchased Africans, not to mention the historians who have studied both, matters quickly became much more complicated. Almost a generation later, another story unfolded: In the wake of the Pequot War in New England in 1637, Massachusetts officials ordered seventeen Pequot Indians—fifteen boys and two women—to be sent out of New England. English Puritans had taken hundreds of captives in the wake of their triumphs in battle at Mistick and the Great Swamp. Subsequently, they put some Pequot men to death and divided the survivors among the English soldiers, their Narragansett allies, or assigned them to the Connecticut and Massachusetts colonies. The seventeen women and boys, however, were placed on board the Salem-built craft of Captain Peirce and earmarked for sale in the remote English colony of Bermuda. For some reason, Captain Peirce missed his landing and continued on to the West Indies. Once there, Peirce landed his cargo on the tiny Puritan outpost off the coast of Nicaragua at Providence Island where, by a stroke of the Providence Island Company's pen, English officials transformed the rebel Pequots into "cannibal negroes," condemned to serve out their lives in slavery in Anglo-America's first true slave society. Twenty years later, a third, almost certainly less well-known event occurred in the English Atlantic: During the late 1650s, Parliament received two petitions on behalf of more than seventy Englishmen claiming that they were "freeborn people of this nation now in slavery" in Barbados. In response, Parliament conducted a brief debate, although some members protested that the petitions had been introduced through irregular channels. Those who were directly implicated by name or as property holders in Barbados were particularly defensive. Martin Noel of Staffordshire noted that he traded into those parts and to the best of his knowledge the work was indeed hard, "but none are sent without their consent" and those who went "were civilly used, and had horses to ride on." Besides, Noel added, they were commonly contracted for five years and did not work as hard as the petitioners claimed because "the work is mostly carried on by the Negroes." Other Parliamentarians were not so certain that the grievances were false. Hugh Boscawen of Cornwall made a particularly compelling argument when he warned that if Englishmen lost the right to a trial or to petition Parliament "our lives will be as cheap as those negroes. They look upon them as their goods, horses, c., and rack them only to make their time out of them, and cherish them to perform their work." For that reason alone, Boscawen "would have [Parliament] consider the trade of buying and selling men." These often-told tales

(at least in certain circles) are important parts of early Anglo-American history and, of course, they are stories about slavery or at least they appear to be so. Numerous historians have argued that the arrival of a small shipload of Africans in early Virginia, while certainly an important chapter in the history of the circulation of African peoples in the broader Atlantic world, does not really tell us much about slavery in Anglo-America because "no law yet enshrined African slavery in either Maryland or Virginia, and the laws that referred to black people were scattered and miscellaneous." It still is not clear if the two dozen or so Africans were actually held as slaves. Certainly, there was no law of slavery in England or its colonies at this time. As a result, the events of 1619 often appear in historical narratives designed to emphasize the fluidity of colonial society and to show the opportunities that existed for the earliest generation of African peoples to assert themselves in English colonies. Some historians have set aside the question of slavery entirely and have focused their attention instead on the English encounter with African peoples or on whether early modern Anglo-Americans subscribed to some version of anti-black prejudice. Different historical lights have also been cast on the story of the Pequot Indian slaves. Indian slavery is currently a vibrant area of scholarly inquiry, but the Pequot story rarely receives more than a brief mention because scholars are much more likely to look at other times and places in order to understand the broad outlines of this underappreciated subject. Those scholars who do consider the sale of the Pequot captives into slavery rightly use this event to demonstrate the constancy of the classical notion that individuals captured in a "just war" could be justly enslaved. In this regard, the punishment suffered by these prisoners of war was not particularly new or surprising. Other scholars, however, see in the story an early example of something totally new coming to fruition in the colonies, such as the encroachment of plantation slavery among the English in the Americas and the racialization of non-European peoples that was ongoing early in the seventeenth century and would only intensify with time. As with the "20. and odd Negroes," the "cannibal negroes" have been used in a variety of ways to suit the demands of scholarly inquiry. And what about the Britons who became slaves? Certainly some scholars have been inclined to sympathize with the aggrieved Barbadians. There is little doubt that a term of service on Barbados, whether as an indentured servant, a convict laborer, or a slave, was hazardous under even the best of circumstances and brutalizing and life-shortening under the worst. Yet scholars have generally been hesitant to take the petitioners at their word. The language of slavery, it has been argued, is more properly thought of as rhetorical flourish in this instance than an accurate characterization of the status of a group of convicts who were transported for their crimes. Their plight, real or imagined, has nonetheless proved to be fruitful fodder for historians interested in uncovering the early relationship between servitude and slavery, the difficulties faced by planters who were desperate for laborers to fuel their expanding agricultural enterprises, and the willingness of officials to stretch the bounds of customary English labor arrangements to maximize their control over what could become a dangerous population if completely unfettered. Although there are countless ways to use these disparate stories from different parts of the early English Atlantic world, they are nonetheless linked by slavery. Unfortunately, characterizing anything as "slavery" or anyone in particular as a "slave" during the first half century of English colonialism tends to produce more confusion than clarity because, from a strictly technical point of view, slavery was not legal in the English-speaking world before the mid-seventeenth century. Barbados and Virginia both enacted important legislation in 1661 to rectify that situation, and subsequent generations of scholars have dutifully taken that date as a convenient starting point for documenting the development of slavery as a key social and economic institution in the English Atlantic world. From that date forward, it is relatively easy to trace the growth of England's plantation complex and the transformation of colonial societies from the mid-Atlantic southward as ever larger numbers of bound Africans began pouring into the Chesapeake and West Indies. By the dawn of the eighteenth century, slavery was fully buttressed by positive law, firmly entrenched in Anglo-American society and culture, and Great Britain was well on its way to becoming the dominant slave-trading power in the world. Before the 1660s, Africans may have seeped into the colonies and may have been held in perpetual bondage, but slavery was neither systematic nor routine. On some level, there is no disputing the rather loose hold slavery had in the English Atlantic world. Yet, it is equally difficult to ignore the fact that Englishmen wrote about slavery with surprising frequency in the hundred or so years before the practice became commonplace. The English engaged slavery in a variety of ways. English travelers and commentators sometimes simply noted slavery's prevalence throughout the world or thought about it as a historical phenomenon that was interesting because, they claimed, it no longer factored into English society and culture. In that regard, the English were often passive observers. At other times, English mariners and merchants bought and sold slaves, seemingly eager to embrace human bondage as a means of achieving greater wealth and status. Thinking about who could be enslaved, and under what circumstances, occupied the attention of more than a few writers, theorists, and legislators. And there were actual "English" slaves themselves, the thousands of English men (and they were mostly men) who were captured and transformed into brute laborers by the Catholic and Muslim powers in the Mediterranean and elsewhere. Slaves and slavery were everywhere. It is well worth asking, however, whether slavery really mattered. One reason so many different historical narratives have been constructed around the three stories that began this work—stories in which Indians became "negroes," Europeans become slaves, and Africans became (perhaps) servants—is that we have rarely devoted as much attention to the meaning of human bondage as we have to the origins of racial slavery in the early Anglo-Atlantic world. Works abound on the meaning of blackness in

the early modern Atlantic world, but the number of scholars who have thought deeply about slavery apart from the effort to explain either the origins of the transatlantic plantation system or the origins of modern racism is small. This book seeks to redress that oversight by demonstrating that slavery was not only central to how the English interacted with people and places throughout the Atlantic world, but also that early English colonialism was necessarily shaped by English ideas about slavery and the willingness to take advantage of human bondage to construct and preserve English colonies during the first half century of overseas settlement. To that end, the first chapter of this book is concerned with the early modern English understanding of, and experience with, human bondage long before the practice became an integral part of England's colonial endeavors. A careful reading of contemporary sources reveals that English men and women knew a great deal more about slavery than we tend to assume. Slavery was recognizable throughout early modern English society, in part, because the idea pervaded the most important texts available to the educated elite. In addition, although it had not existed as a legal institution for several centuries, a number of discrete manifestations of human bondage encouraged Tudor-Stuart English men and women to think and write about slavery in familiar terms. Some people even seem to have imagined that England would be a better place if slavery were reintroduced as a living institution. Although this idea proved to be impractical, the language and image of slavery in precolonial England was both widespread and familiar, something that would inform the idea of slavery in subtle but powerful ways in subsequent decades. If there continued to be some debate about the real presence of slavery in England, Chapter 2 leaves little doubt about the pervasiveness of human bondage throughout the world. Even as many of their countrymen were able to think and write about slavery from a comfortable remove, thousands of Englishmen were coming face-to-face with human bondage as they spread out across the globe during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. And regardless of where they traveled, English observers routinely noted both the presence of slaves and the important role played by slavery in non-English settings. Because they came from a place largely untouched by the actual practice of slavery, noting its pervasiveness in foreign lands was an easy way to set the English apart from and above the people and nations they encountered in Europe, Asia, and Africa. It is important to note, however, early English impressions of slavery as it existed beyond England's borders were not determined by racial or even protoracial conceits. Initial English accounts of the nature of slavery in Africa are therefore worth scrutinizing because they highlight how the pursuit of economic gain at the expense of European competitors, particularly the Portuguese, played a larger role in how English merchants and mariners encountered and interacted with African peoples than did any abstract anti-black ideology or any persistent interest in the emerging transatlantic slave trade. The complicated relationship between Englishmen and Africans in the broader Atlantic world during the late sixteenth century comes in for fuller treatment in Chapter 3. The Atlantic world was tainted by the stain of slavery from an early date and the number of captive Africans being transported across the ocean in the holds of European ships was on the rise as English sailors began to traverse the seas in greater numbers. Although a loose link between Africans and slavery already existed in the minds of early modern Englishmen, the English were much more likely to make a direct connection between the descendants of African peoples and the opprobrious practice of slavery when they happened to be in Spain's Atlantic empire. English pirates and privateers, particularly when they operated in the West Indies, were among the first of their nation to conceive of, and treat, Africans as simple commodities. At the same time, the English acceptance of racial slavery in this context in no way prevented them from engaging Africans as translators, concubines, shipmates, soldiers, intermediaries, and more. Indeed, they had little choice; Spain's Atlantic world would have been impenetrable and incomprehensible to the English without African allies. Thus, although Englishmen in Africa and the Spanish colonies can be accused of callousness toward Africans, they do not seem to have wedded themselves to an intransigent view of dark-skinned peoples. The English did not immediately accept either that Africans were necessarily best suited to slavery or that the definitive slave in the Atlantic world was most easily identified by the color of his or her skin. Crucially, just as Englishmen were becoming more familiar with the practice of slavery and the enslavement of African peoples, they were confronted by the harsh prospect that they, too, were legitimate candidates for human bondage under the right circumstances. Chapter 4 reveals that Tudor and early Stuart Englishmen devoted a great deal of attention to explaining what it meant to be English and repeatedly emphasized that theirs was a heritage colored by the efforts of others to enslave Englishmen and subjugate the English nation. When, beginning in the late sixteenth century, tens of thousands of English mariners and merchants were captured and enslaved in other parts of the world, Englishmen scrutinized these developments and nervously identified an emerging threat to their national integrity. Because some English slaves escaped or were ransomed, former slaves were able to publish firsthand accounts that cultivated fearful stereotypes and generated shocking images, which were disseminated throughout the land in royal proclamations, in sermons, and on stage. Nothing else did as much to shape the way the general English public thought about slavery, especially what it meant to be enslaved, before the elaboration of England's Atlantic plantation complex in the mid-seventeenth century. The final two chapters of this book follow these separate threads to the English colonial world, particularly during the first half of the seventeenth century. In the half century after the settlement of Jamestown, slavery and other forms of human bondage could be found in every English colony, but how slavery manifested itself between 1607 and the mid-seventeenth century was quite different from the condition at the heart of the race-based plantation labor system that would prevail in a later

era. Africans, Indians, and Europeans all could be (and were) subjected to enslavement in early America, but the reasons why individuals from each of these groups might be enslaved varied greatly. So, too, did the meaning of slavery itself. Slavery was often only loosely related to the need for labor during the early seventeenth century. The meaning of slavery was more closely connected to the question of what it meant to be English in the Atlantic world, especially with regard to the practice of holding fellow English men and women in bondage, but this attitude also impacted Indians. When Anglo-American colonists held Africans in bondage, however, they had a much harder time explaining their actions. Of course, the manifestation of racial slavery in the early English colonies was consistent with the prevailing customs of Spain and Portugal's Atlantic world. It should hardly be surprising that characteristic features of Iberian and Iberian Atlantic slavery were present in the English colonies before the institution was defined in positive law. The presence of free blacks, the tacit acceptance of racial intermixture, and the effort to integrate African peoples into the Christian community all things that would be discouraged later are revealing evidence of the lingering influence of what Englishmen had been witnessing and experiencing in the Americas since the late sixteenth century. It may have looked a bit different from what would be commonplace later, but slavery was present in the English colonies from the beginning. This brings us back to the stories recounted at the beginning of this book. Forty years ago the historian Winthrop Jordan quipped, "[W]ere [it] possible to poll the inhabitants of Jamestown, Virginia, concerning their reaction to those famous first 'twenty Negars' who arrived in 1619 I would be among the first to be at the foot of the gangplank, questionnaire in hand." Judging by the response to his seminal study over subsequent decades and the important place the date "1619" has played in scholarly enterprises, a number of people would love to know the results of such a survey. I, for one, would especially like to know what those early Anglo-Virginians thought about slavery in general terms, not just as it may have applied to the new arrivals. We know, of course, that racial slavery would ultimately become a characteristic feature of every English colony in the Americas and the defining institution in virtually every settlement south of the Potomac River and throughout the West Indies. Yet, English peoples neither thought about nor used slavery during the early modern era in ways that were consistent with how things would stand at the end of the seventeenth century. The cultural, intellectual, and legal worlds out of which English colonists emerged prepared them to think about human bondage in different ways and under different circumstances. Few historians will challenge the notion that Anglo-American slavery came to full fruition in England's colonies during the last half of the seventeenth century, but it is important to acknowledge that slavery was not simply invented out of whole cloth, in situ, by people trying to figure out how to do things for the first time. It is customary these days to distinguish between "slave societies" and "societies with slaves" as a way of measuring the relative impact slavery had on local and regional cultures and economies. By this measure, no English slave societies existed before the plantation revolution reconfigured English America in a way that would make some of those settlements largely unrecognizable to their founders. A good case could even be made that, before the mid-seventeenth century, most English colonies barely even qualified as "societies with slaves," possessing as they did a supply of primarily European laborers and lacking even a rudimentary infrastructure for employing and managing bound African slaves. In raw economic and demographic terms, the institution of slavery and the presence of African peoples were equally unimpressive and bordering on insignificant. Regardless, it is the central premise of this work that both African peoples and slavery often quite apart from each other were central to the articulation of an Anglo-Atlantic world in the century before 1660. Englishmen repeatedly defined themselves and their nation in ways that can only be understood if one takes seriously the idea that, even without plantations and even without large numbers of bound Africans living in their midst, slavery mattered. It may have been possible, while in England, to imagine that theirs was that exceptionally rare thing in the early modern era: neither a slave society nor a society with slaves, but a society epitomized by its commitment to the ideals of liberty and freedom. That, at least, is what early modern Englishmen liked to think and what we sometimes choose to think about them. Once they set sail into the Atlantic world and beyond, however, there was little doubt that slavery was ubiquitous. Long before the establishment of English colonies in the Americas, the subsequent arrival of African peoples to those colonies, and the creation of plantations dedicated to the production of staple crops, England was already wrestling with the pressing problem of slavery. Ideas about slavery were varied in early modern England, but human bondage was perceived by many people to be a serious issue that bore down on them as individuals and as a nation. As such, when Englishmen thought and wrote about slavery during this period, they were typically much more concerned about the possibility of their own enslavement than they were with the condition of African or Indian peoples. By the standards established in eighteenth-century British America and by historians of the mature plantation complex, early modern Englishmen imagined slavery in exceedingly loose terms. Without a doubt, English conceptions of slavery were wide ranging and often incoherent, but the diffuse nature of English ideas also provides a clear guide for understanding the logic of human bondage in the early English colonies. Eventually, the diversity of experiences and excess of precedents that created the problem of how to deal with both slavery and African peoples in the early Anglo-American social order would be simplified. Numerous scholars have worked that problem out. It is important, however, to try to make sense of those ideas and experiences that framed the earliest English colonial efforts and social relations among Europeans, Africans, and indigenous Americans in the New World. Before we move on to the question of how things changed, it is incumbent upon us to grapple with how things stood before the

seemingly irresistible power of the plantation complex, with its attendant demographic and economic considerations, overwashed the Anglo-Atlantic world. If we want to make sense of the "20. and odd Negroes," the Pequot "cannibal negroes," or the petitioners who claimed that they had been reduced to slavery, we need to think about these stories as a reflection of the English Atlantic world as it was rather than as what it would become. We need to know as much about the "before" as we do the "after."