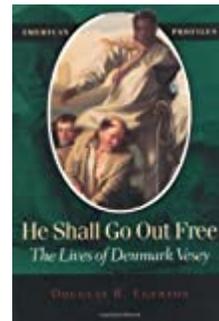




**Douglas R. Egerton.** *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey.* Madison: Madison House, 1999. Xxiv + 240 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-945612-67-4.



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## Mythology and Heroism in the Slave South

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Once upon a time, white historians of Southern slavery argued that African Americans accepted and even appreciated being held in bondage. U. B. Phillips, the eminent authority on such matters for the first half of the twentieth century, pointed to the “natural amenability of the blacks” as a “decisive factor in their initial enslavement” and suggested that the institution reflected “gentleness, kind-hearted friendship and mutual loyalty” between the races.[1] This flawed white scholarship was built upon the proslavery myths manufactured by the slaveowners themselves and was echoed by twentieth-century novelists such as Margaret Mitchell. In the white reading of slavery, slaves seldom seemed to plot insurrection because they were viewed, by whites, as having been largely content in their subordinate social station.

Not until the publication (in 1979) of Eugene Genovese’s masterful comparative work, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, did scholars appreciate the extent to which demography and geography limited Southern slaves’ ability to employ widescale violence against their masters.[2] Outnumbered by white Southerners and with-

out widespread access to a hinterland conducive to the construction of autonomous maroon societies, African-American slaves adopted alternative strategies of resistance. The uncovering of this slave culture of resistance surely constitutes one of the magnificent achievements of professional scholars in post-World-War-II America.[3]

But what of the small number of black revolutionaries who disregarded the impossibly long odds and plotted warfare against their white oppressors? Their willingness to employ violence against white women and children as well as white men has rendered them controversial figures. Since the colonial era, the idea of blacks plotting to slit the throats of their owners has generated tremendous discomfort in white America. Even in 1976, efforts to memorialize Denmark Vesey with a portrait in Charleston’s Galliard Municipal Auditorium sparked bitter complaints from the local press.[4] White Charlestonians likened Vesey to Hitler and Attila the Hun, and some residents disliked the memorial enough to steal it.

More recently, popular filmmaker Mel Gibson refused to incorporate images of African Americans turning on the white master class during the Revolution, de-

spite a wealth of evidence suggesting that slaves flocked to the Tory cause in the hopes of gaining their freedom. Gibson's film *The Patriot* countenanced the white American revolutionaries' use of violence against the British, even fetishizing it through scenes in which the film's hero – a figure loosely based on “the Swamp Fox” Francis Marion – shoots, slices, and skewers a series of fantastically evil British soldiers. Yet the filmmakers rejected the possibility that such tactics might be employed by African American slaves against their white oppressors.[5]

And how could this mainstream Hollywood film have done otherwise when imagery of black slaves smiting their masters would have rankled white America's mythology of the Revolution as a justifiable struggle between moral and aggrieved colonists and tyrannical British imperialists? To admit that slaves were eager to fight their white oppressors is to acknowledge that many white revolutionaries were themselves tyrants who deserved to die gruesome deaths. Simply put, the myth of the American nation's heroic origins is contradicted by the thought of black violence directed toward white men and women of substance.

Of course, the legacy of black revolutionaries poses problems for contemporary African Americans as well as whites. When the white novelist William Styron attempted to portray Nat Turner's life in a work of historical fiction, black intellectuals responded with outrage at his presumption. Leaving aside the merits of their various complaints about Styron's depiction of Turner's emotional state, one discerns in their responses a common sense of outrage over a white author's efforts to address the human foibles of a black hero. The life of Turner offered these thinkers the promise of unbridled black heroism in the face of bondage. In the context of the ongoing struggle for black civil rights, Turner's potential political uses as a black icon mattered far more than any historical or artistic imperative to reconstruct the man, warts and all.[6]

For these reasons, revolutionaries such as Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner are difficult figures to address with any measure of scholarly detachment. Any historian seeking to recapture the life of such figures cannot help but think of the reception awaiting Styron who, we should keep in mind, was not even claiming to be writing an accurate history of his subject. Certainly Douglas Egerton's biography reflects a tension between the historian's responsibility to dissect mythologies and the socially-conscious individual's desire to respect African American heroes who challenged slavery

at its core.

Egerton begins his work with an event that transpired more than four decades after Denmark Vesey's death by execution in 1822. Upon the defeat of the Confederacy in April 1865, black Charlestonians set about constructing a new African Methodist Episcopal Church – an institution that had been decimated when whites learned of Vesey's conspiracy to rebel against slavery. The building project illustrated the extent to which African Americans could unite behind a project and see it to fruition relying only upon members of their own race. The architect of the new building, moreover, was Denmark Vesey's son, Robert Vesey (xxiii-xxiv).

Egerton's use of this episode as the launching point for his narrative provides an early hint as to how he chooses to situate Vesey against the swirling claims of white and black mythologies about slavery. Although Vesey's plot was revealed before a single master could be attacked and although Vesey was put to death along with thirty-four fellow conspirators, Egerton begins his book on a positive note. Between the horrors of the slave experience and the bitter disappointments of Reconstruction, African Americans emerged from the Civil War with pride and optimism. Vesey's life, we are led to expect, somehow contributed to and reflected a vibrant sense of African American racial solidarity.

Chapter One pieces together the first fifteen years of Vesey's life. Here, Egerton displays his considerable talents as a researcher and a writer. From shards of evidence most likely provided by Vesey's former master and from diligent inquiry into recent scholarship on slavery in the Caribbean, Egerton presents his readers with a very plausible chronology of events in Vesey's childhood. Most likely born on the small island of St. Thomas, the young slave apparently encountered a broad array of cultural influences. Controlled by the Danish, the island population included “Jewish Tradesmen,” “French shopkeepers,” “Spanish adventurers,” “Scots-Irish overseers,” and “German landowners” (p.6).

Slaves raised in this diverse cultural environment managed to create a Creole culture in which elements of traditional African spiritual practices were combined with New World strategies for resisting the most dehumanizing aspects of chattel slavery. Past scholars have suggested that Vesey was of mixed racial origins – perhaps even the progeny of his owner. Egerton persuasively undermines this assumption, replacing it with a more significant point about the young boy's Creole background. As a member of the island's Creole slave

community, Vesey was no doubt well-prepared to master new languages and to acclimate himself to new environments.

Upon reaching the age of fourteen, Vesey found himself sold to slave traders who intended to ship him to Saint Domingue, an island with a far more robust and far deadlier plantation economy than St. Thomas. The ship's captain, Joseph Vesey hailed from Bermuda and had recently contributed skills as a pilot to the cause of the American revolutionaries. In 1781, he renewed his participation in the slave trade and encountered the boy who would one day take his name. Struck by the slave boy's "beauty, alertness, and intelligence," Joseph Vesey and his sailors turned him into the "ship's pet and plaything." Although Egerton points to the literature on homosexual activity on English sailing vessels, he shies away from the obvious conclusion that the boy was spared imprisonment below decks in order to service the crew's sexual needs. Egerton instead claims that "the child's later attachment to the tall mariner suggests that he was not raped or otherwise ill-used, at least by the captain." (p. 16)

Yet this later "attachment" was the slave's best and only chance to advance his position in life and he most likely would have cultivated it even had their relationship begun through coerced sex. Moreover, a longstanding grievance against the captain might help to explain why the slave might one day become one of the few free Blacks in Charleston who was willing to risk his status in an unlikely bid to overturn slavery by force. I cannot help but wonder if Egerton, on some level, shied away from this conclusion because he was wary of sullyng the heroic stature of his subject.[7]

Whatever the nature of this initial relationship between the captain and the slave boy, the boy was sold along with the rest of the human cargo when the ship arrived at Saint Domingue. There, he acquired fluency in French and discerned that a short, miserable life was in store for him if he remained a plantation laborer. Accordingly, he suddenly manifested symptoms of epilepsy – symptoms that disappeared after his tenure on the sugar plantation ended. Returned to Vesey as unfit merchandise, the boy became a permanent member of Vesey's crew. As such, the captain deigned to name him Telemaque, a classical reference to the son of the wandering Greek hero Odysseus.[8] Vesey's allusion to an ancient Greek poem underscored the multi-cultural dynamic to the Atlantic plantation system. Telemaque already spoke Creole Dutch, Dutch and French. He quickly mastered

English as well and no doubt employed his linguistic skills to communicate with his fellow sailors and with the slaves whom the ship proceeded to transport over the next year.

During this point in the young slave's life, the future revolutionary witnessed the horrors of the Middle Passage from the relatively favorable vantage point of crew member instead of human cargo. Still a slave, he lacked the resources to do more than empathize with the Africans below decks; but this experience likely fixed itself in Telemaque's memory and might have contributed to his future decision to challenge slavery at its very core. By 1783, Joseph Vesey had resettled in Charleston with his teenaged slave who had survived his brush with bondage in Saint Domingue by his own cleverness and his new master's attraction to him. Whether he maintained an "abiding faith in the gods of Africa" (as Egerton claims) does not seem clear from the evidence presented by the author (p. 26).

Over the next decade, Telemaque adjusted to an urban life that afforded him an unprecedented degree of autonomy in his daily work routine. As Captain Vesey continued his involvement in the slave trade, Telemaque traveled through the city, collecting shipments (including slaves) and paying duties at the Charleston custom house. Such involvement in his master's distasteful business ventures has led some historians to speculate whether Vesey would one day be filled with "self-disgust for his former status as the eager henchman of a [slave] trader" (p. 37). Egerton wisely notes that "there is no evidence, of course, that Telemaque was at any time an 'eager' participant in the captain's business" (p. 37).

Yet Egerton himself is reluctant to frame Telemaque's relationship with Captain Vesey in starkly adversarial terms (p. 16), suggesting that their exchanges contained "equal parts love and loathing" (p. 36). This reading, however, appears to be equally unsupported by the evidence presented by the author, and my own sense is that Telemaque was biting his tongue on any occasion when he seemed to interact affectionately with the man who quite possibly used him for sexual sport and most certainly deposited him on a sugar plantation to meet his death.

Relative to slaves laboring in the fields, Denmark – as Telemaque came to be called in Charleston – certainly led a life of considerable autonomy. But that autonomy came with the price of doing his master's bidding in the slave trade. Beyond that, Denmark's autonomy was severely constrained by the standards of the free, white men with

whom he interacted constantly. As Egerton suggests, the slave could not even share a household with his wife, a slave named Beck who lived a few blocks from the Vesey family (pp. 47-52). Still, a slave in Denmark's position could take some comfort in the possibility that this oppressive racial hierarchy might disappear in a flash of revolutionary violence. Charleston in the 1790s was a city wracked with fears of slave insurrection. The bloody and successful slave uprising in Haiti led to an influx of slaveowning refugees into Charleston. Native white Southerners saw, in this migrant population, their worst fears coming to pass. And as Denmark witnessed the master class's nervousness and interacted with witnesses to racial warfare, he likely began to imagine a better future for himself and his family.

In chapter three, Egerton fleshes out the work routines of urban slaves such as Denmark. Skilled slave workers hired out to jobs around Charleston could earn significant income for their owners. But they also created an underground economy in goods that they sold for their own profit, and this economy could potentially serve as "an illicit network of communication available to shrewd slaves" (p. 68). Here, Egerton introduces us to some of the slaves who would serve as Denmark's co-conspirators. Slaves such as Polydore Faber enjoyed numerous opportunities for illicit interaction as they wandered from tavern to tavern, drinking, gambling, and conniving with a motley assortment of fellow slaves, free blacks, foreign sailors, and local white businessmen, artisans, and criminals. Large plantation owners struggled, with good reason, to isolate their bondservants from the potentially incendiary influences of this urban environment. Like so many successful merchants before him, Captain Vesey did purchase a plantation on the Ashley River, but he did not seek entry into the regional aristocracy. Rather than attempting to marry into the ranks of the slaveholding elite, the captain openly initiated a sexual relationship with "a free East Indian," eventually marrying her in 1796 (p. 72).

It would be tempting to read into this interracial union the possibility that Captain Vesey oversaw a household in which people of color could be treated with fairness and respect. I see evidence, however, of no such thing. Over the years, Vesey was deepening his involvement with plantation slavery. Despite his wealth and his legal ability to do so, he demonstrated no inclination to liberate Denmark from bondage. More disturbing, Vesey's interracial marriage confirms that his sexual tastes were oriented toward people of color thereby increasing the probability that his early relationship with

Denmark had involved coerced sex. Egerton presents no persuasive reason why Denmark might have been kindly disposed to his master. Indeed, when fate intervened and Denmark won a lottery prize of fifteen hundred dollars, his owner forced him to pay full market value for his freedom in 1799 (p. 73). At the age of thirty-three, Denmark Vesey had managed to enter the ranks of Charleston's free black population.

He now faced a choice. He could distance himself from the slave population to better secure his standing as a free man, or he could use the privileges of his free existence to struggle for the slave population's liberation. To be sure, Vesey took steps to solidify his economic prospects in white society. His adoption of his former owner's surname no doubt assisted his transition into the free economy of Charleston (p. 90). As a carpenter, he distinguished himself through his "great strength and activity," although Egerton points out that rumors of his wealth were apparently exaggerated.

Whatever his success as a black artisan in a white-dominated economy, Vesey remained emotionally vested in the slave community. Whereas the "Brown Society" of Charleston mulattoes struggled to ingratiate itself with the white elite, Vesey developed friendships with slaves such as Rolla Bennett, Peter Poyas, and Monday Gell (p. 97). Far from avoiding the slaves who filled Charleston's busy streets, Vesey preached to them a message of equality and defiance toward white authority. His enormous physical presence and powerful intellect emboldened him to denounce slavery in public.

Egerton demonstrates the complicated ways in which Christianity factored into Vesey's defiance of the slaveholders' regime. Rejecting the slaveholding white ministry's message of obedience and humility, Vesey and his circle of friends filled the pews of the African Methodist Episcopal church on Cow Alley (p. 110-111). Assuming the responsibilities of a class leader, Vesey invoked the Old Testament, likening African Americans to the Hebrews marked by God for liberation. In his analysis of this theological development, Egerton makes a fascinating case for the convergence between the Hebrew Bible and traditional African cosmology – an affinity personified by Vesey's close relationship with the East African priest Jack Pritchard (p. 118-21).

White authorities, for obvious reasons, disapproved of the AME congregations. Their predictions that autonomous black worship would lead to insurrection became self-fulfilling in 1818, when white authorities burst into the African church and arrested a number of influ-

ential African American worshippers. Embittered and driven underground, spiritual leaders such as Vesey were now in a position to push an ever more radical message of rebellion to the city's slave population.

After spending some three and a half decades in Charleston, Vesey plotted the destruction of the city. Eyeing the barely guarded arsenal, Vesey planned for bold and decisive action against white authority. The black revolutionaries intended to arm themselves and flee for the republic of Haiti, taking with them as many slaves as they could liberate. Befitting his Caribbean background, his experience at sea, and his awareness of contemporary political developments, the scheme reflected Vesey's knowledge of the broader Atlantic world. Egerton contends that Vesey read of the Missouri Controversy and sought to convince Charleston slaves that the U.S. Congress had already liberated them from bondage (p. 130).

Seeking to frame his own revolution in the broader context of global democratic sentiment, Vesey scheduled the day of uprising to take place on July 14th. Although slaves' efforts to violently gain their freedom fared poorly both before and after the Vesey scheme was uncovered, Egerton takes pains to emphasize that this was one plot that might well have worked. He notes the black majority residing in Charleston (p. 128); he accepts as plausible the white authorities' estimate that nine thousand slave conspirators were privy to the plot (p. 140); and he maintains that Vesey and his men could well have departed the United States before white forces could retake the city (p. 136). Egerton unflinchingly portrays Vesey's willingness to employ violence against white women and children as well as men (pp. 146-47). In sum, Vesey springs to life in this biography as a race-conscious radical who was clever enough to succeed in striking a blow against slavery.

White authorities in Charleston, however, learned of the conspiracy in May 1822. Peter, a trusted slave of John C. Prioleau, informed his master that he had been invited to join in racial warfare against lowcountry whites. The slaveowners' responses to the Vesey conspiracy, suggests Egerton, conveyed the conflicted psychology of the planter elite. On the one hand, white planters needed to take seriously the threat of insurrection, lest they lose control over their slaves. On the other hand, to maintain their collective sanity in the face of the lowcountry's black majority, white planters invested in the proslavery fiction of an obedient and happy slave workforce.

Hence, when Governor Thomas Bennett received

news that his trusted slave Rolla had joined the conspiracy, Bennett's mind reeled. Despite the magnitude of the accusation, the governor believed his slave when he, not surprisingly, denied any knowledge of the Vesey plot (p. 162). Even as the white elite became progressively more convinced that their slaves meant them harm, Bennett had a difficult time grasping that slaves wanted to be free. Notwithstanding the governor's inaction, the white elite roused itself to prevent the plot's enactment. The leading conspirators were rounded up, tortured, tried, and in thirty-five cases, executed – but not before their owners' paternalistic pretensions were decimated by the slaves' bloody intentions (p.183).

And yet, once they removed the threat posed by Vesey and the would-be revolutionaries, the slaveowners reconstructed their proslavery fantasies about plantation life. They had no choice unless they wanted to acknowledge their fear of the people whom they had enslaved. Prominent Baptist minister Richard Furman had been rebuffed by Vesey when he attempted to offer spiritual counsel in Vesey's cell. But after Vesey's execution, Furman campaigned among white politicians such as Bennett, urging them not to blame the plot on slave exposure to Christian doctrine. In the end, whites believed that the plot sprang from black distortion of biblical teachings. As such, white authorities further restricted African Americans' abilities to worship autonomously. The AME church was knocked to the ground, but the slaves' desire for freedom remained intact.

Throughout the work, Egerton emphasizes the heroic undercurrent to the waves of tragedy that washed through Vesey's life. Fittingly, the biography of Vesey ends not on the scaffolds but with the demise of the slaveowners' quest to protect their institution of unfree labor. When the American flag was once again raised at Fort Sumter, one of Vesey's children was on hand to witness the historic moment. Although Vesey's plot had failed in its short term goal of armed assault against the planters, his spirit of resistance lived on in the troops who struggled successfully against the Confederacy. Notwithstanding the personal tragedies and unhappy ending to Vesey's life, Egerton presents his biography as a story of hope.

I do not wish to quibble with this approach since I too see tremendous heroism in Vesey's life story. Still, there are moments in Egerton's book that leave me wondering if the author does not try too hard to emphasize Vesey's positive attributes. Responding to the charge that Vesey was a domineering polygamist, for example,

Egerton suggests that he did not have more than one wife at the same time and that he loved and looked after his children. The evidence for any such reading is sketchy at best. I do not necessarily disagree with his speculations about Vesey playing the part of loving father; yet I wonder if Egerton is not searching for ways in which to build up his subject as a role model worthy of admiration in modern America. Certainly, a polygamist who beat his wives makes for a less sympathetic figure around which to build a story of black courage and hope.

In similar fashion, Egerton discounts the slave confessional testimony suggesting that some of the revolutionaries intended to gain sexual access to white female prisoners (p. 168). To be sure, Egerton offers logical reasons for concluding that the black revolutionaries had more important strategic goals to pursue than the enjoyment of forbidden sexual pleasures. Yet, his analysis on this point leaves me wondering if Egerton is willing to accept the slave confessional testimony as sound except in places where it cast the conspirators in a less than favorable light according to contemporary standards for heroism. Egerton, for example, rejects out of hand the possibility that all of the slave testimony was tainted because it was extracted through torture and the threat of imminent death. To reason otherwise is to open the door to the revisionist argument that the plot itself was more the product of white hysteria than black subterfuge – a possibility that Egerton forcefully discounts.

Having raised these concerns, let me make clear that Egerton has tackled a difficult scholarly task with aplomb. It is no mean feat to reconstruct Vesey's life in a manner that is intelligible to undergraduate and lay readers while at the same time engaging the rich historiography of slavery. With masterful prose and a command of the vast recent literature on slavery in the Atlantic world, Egerton succeeds at his task. In the near future, I look forward to assigning this book in my courses. I imagine that I will be dealing with the book's larger issues for many years to come.

#### Notes.

[1] Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York, 1918), 454 and 514. Phillips does offer a chapter on "slave crime" which surveys the evidence from a number

of slave insurrection plots; however, he ultimately argues that slaveowners were correct to express "confidence that no great disasters were to be feared" (p. 488).

[2] Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge, 1979).

[3] For an overview of this historical literature, see Charles B. Dew, "The Slavery Experience," in *Interpreting Southern History: Historiographical Essays in Honor of Sanford W. Higginbotham*, eds. John B. Boles and Evelyn Thomas Nolen (Baton Rouge, 1987), 120-161.

[4] Edward A. Pearson, *Designs against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Chapel Hill, 1999).

[5] Kenneth Turan, "Give Him Liberty or Give Him Death – Lots of it," *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 2000, Section F, p. 1.

[6] John Henrik Clarke, ed., *The Second Crucifixion of Nat Turner* (Baltimore, 1997 ed.).

[7] To establish the place of homosexual relations in seafaring culture, Egerton cites B. R. Burg, *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition: English Sea Rovers in the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean* (New York, 1995 ed.). For a revisionist approach to this issue, see Hans Turley, *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash: Piracy, Sexuality, and Masculine Identity* (New York, 1999).

[8] This is the stuff that biographer's metaphors are made of, but Egerton seems to get the plot of the Odyssey wrong when he mines it for literary parallels to Telemaque's life. For example, Egerton claims that Telemachus "was shipwrecked on the perilous island of Ogyia, from whence he was rescued by Calypso" (p. 21) when, in fact, it was his father Odysseus who experienced that fate. He then refers to Calypso as "a savior who treated him kindly," thereby overlooking her subsequent decision to keep him imprisoned for years as her sexual slave. On this level, Egerton's use of Calypso as a metaphor for Captain Vesey strikes me as more apt than he knows on several counts. See *The Odyssey*, Book 5.

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