

Module: Literary Texts

Level : 2nd year

Teacher: Dr. Nassima Amirouche

Lecture 3: LITERATURE IN THE SOUTHERN AND MIDDLE COLONIES

Pre-revolutionary southern literature was aristocratic and secular, reflecting the dominant social and economic systems of the southern plantations. Early English immigrants were drawn to the southern colonies because of economic opportunity rather than religious freedom.

Although many southerners were poor farmers or tradespeople living not much better than slaves, the southern literate upper class was shaped by the classical, Old World ideal of a noble landed gentry made possible by slavery. The institution released wealthy southern whites from manual labor, afforded them leisure, and made the dream of an aristocratic life in the American wilderness possible. The Puritan emphasis on hard work, education and earnestness was rare -- instead we hear of such pleasures as horseback riding and hunting. The church was the focus of a genteel social life, not a forum for minute examinations of conscience.

William Byrd (1674-1744)

Southern culture naturally revolved around the ideal of the gentleman. A Renaissance man equally good at managing a farm and reading classical Greek, he had the power of a feudal lord.

William Byrd describes the gracious way of life at his plantation, Westover, in his famous letter of 1726 to his English friend Charles Boyle, Earl of Orrery:

Besides the advantages of pure air, we abound in all kinds of provisions without expense (I mean we who have plantations). I have a large family of my own, and my doors are open to everybody, yet I have no bills to pay, and half- a-crown will rest undisturbed in my pockets for many moons altogether.

Like one of the patriarchs, I have my flock and herds, my bondmen and bondwomen, and every sort of trade amongst my own servants, so that I live in a kind of independence on everyone but Providence...

William Byrd epitomizes the spirit of the southern colonial gentry. The heir to 1,040 hectares, which he enlarged to 7,160 hectares, he was a merchant, trader, and planter. He was born with a lively intelligence that his father augmented by sending him to excellent schools in England and Holland. He visited the French Court, became a Fellow of the Royal Society, and was friendly with some of the leading English writers of his day, particularly William Wycherley and William Congreve. His London diaries are the opposite of those of the New England Puritans, full of fancy dinners, glittering parties with little introspective soul-searching.

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Byrd is best known today for his lively *History of the Dividing Line*, a diary of a 1729 trip of some weeks and 960 kilometers into the interior to survey the line dividing the neighboring colonies of Virginia and North Carolina. The quick impressions that vast wilderness, Indians, half-savage whites, wild beasts, and every sort of difficulty made on this civilized gentleman form a uniquely American and very southern book. He ridicules the first Virginia colonists, "about a hundred men, most of them reprobates of good families," and jokes that at Jamestown, "like true Englishmen, they built a church that cost no more than fifty pounds, and a tavern that cost five hundred." Byrd's writings are fine examples of the keen interest Southerners took in the material world: the land, Indians, plants, animals, and settlers.

Robert Beverley (c. 1673-1722)

Robert Beverley, another wealthy planter and author of *The History and Present State of Virginia* (1705- 1722) records the history of the Virginia colony in a humane and vigorous style. Like Byrd, he admired the Indians and remarked on the strange European superstitions about Virginia -- for example, the belief "that the country turns all people black who go there." He noted the great hospitality of southerners, a trait maintained today.

The rowdy, satirical poem "The Sotweed Factor" satirizes the colony of Maryland, where the author, an Englishman named Ebenezer Cook, had unsuccessfully tried his hand as a tobacco merchant. Cook exposed the crude ways of the colony with high-spirited humor, and accused the colonists of cheating him.

But woe to him that's doomed to be an ass,

With these of different hue compared, alas!

To draw his cart, to munch his thistle, and,

What's worse, to bear the petulance and pride

Of perverse ribald groom; or to bestride

His ugly back, and scourge him through the land!

This excerpt mocks the notion of social hierarchy and the indignities faced by those considered lower in status. The comparison between humans and donkeys satirizes the absurdities of class distinctions and the arbitrary nature of societal roles.

In general, the colonial South may fairly be linked with a light, worldly, informative, and realistic literary tradition. Imitative of English literary fashions, the southerners attained imaginative heights in witty, precise observations of distinctive New World conditions.

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Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (c. 1745-c. 1797)

Important black writers like Olaudah Equiano and Jupiter Hammon emerged during the colonial period. Equiano, an Ibo from Niger (West Africa), was the first black in America to write an autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789). In the book - - an early example of the slave narrative genre -- Equiano gives an account of his native land and the horrors and cruelties of his captivity and enslavement in the West Indies. Equiano, who converted to Christianity, movingly laments his cruel "un-Christian" treatment by Christians -- a sentiment many African-Americans would voice in centuries to come.

Jupiter Hammon (c. 1720-c. 1800)

The black American poet Jupiter Hammon, a slave on Long Island, New York, is remembered for his religious poems as well as for *An Address to the Negroes of the State of New York* (1787), in which he advocated freeing children of slaves instead of condemning them to hereditary slavery. His poem "An Evening Thought" was the first poem published by a black male in America