

***Ancient Rhetoric, Abolition, and Reverend Peter Thomas Stanford's  
The Tragedy (1897)***  
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**Abstract:** Following the efflorescence of scholarship on Black freedom narratives and activism, this article examines Reverend Peter Thomas Stanford's *The Tragedy* (1897), an antilynching text which recounts a history of colonization and enslavement from the Mediterranean in the 7th century BCE to America in the late 19th century CE. Together with a study of the ancient discourses, Rev. Stanford's work is here situated in the context of the white paternalism of British and American publishing during the late 19th century, with particular attention to Harriet Beecher Stowe's preface to Stanford's *The Tragedy* (1897). The article analyzes how Rev. Stanford uses ancient rhetoric to argue for the sanctity of Black life, including both classical and biblical references, concluding with reflections upon pedagogical applications as well as the need for further study.

**Keywords:** Black literature, ancient rhetoric, Reverend Peter Thomas Stanford, Herodotus, Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Reverend Peter Thomas Stanford (ca. 1858-1909) was a Black author, activist, and minister who lived in America, Canada, and England in the late 19th century. In 1894, Rev. Stanford was selected by a group of transatlantic philanthropic Christian leaders and members of the public to return to America to conduct abolitionist research as a representative of England. After making the journey, his mission was to document and report on the ongoing lynchings of Black people in the United States. Rev. Stanford spent two years fulfilling this duty and published the results of his research in a historical narrative entitled, *The Tragedy of the Negro in America: A Condensed History of the Enslavement, Sufferings, Emancipation, Present Condition, and Progress of the Negro Race in the United States of America* (1897). Today, many scholars and students simply refer to this text as *The Tragedy*.<sup>1</sup>

*The Tragedy* recounts a history of colonization and enslavement from the Mediterranean in the 7th century BCE to America in the late 19th century CE. Rev. Stanford's research, including statistics, personal stories, and biographies of activists, emphasizes the experiences of Black people in the United States between the 17th to 19th centuries CE.<sup>2</sup> He shares with readers the staggering brutality of enslavement, the persisting hope of Black communities and abolitionist allies, and the contemporary state of violence against Black people in America. On the dedication page of *The Tragedy*, Rev. Stanford states that he carried out this research "in the hope of helping create a strong, healthy public opinion that will

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<sup>1</sup> The present analysis focuses on the 1897 edition that is available online for free through the *Documenting the American South* program hosted by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/stanford/stanford.html>; link accessed Feb. 10, 2024. I also rely on a hard copy of the 1898 edition of *The Tragedy* which includes press comments as well as additional photos edited by S.D. Adkins in 2020.

<sup>2</sup> The choice to capitalize "Black" and use lowercase "white" is based on the perspectives on the history of inequity and white supremacy put forth by Coleman (2020), Laws (2020); and Kanigel (2024).

make it impossible for outrages and lynchings to be much longer continued” (1897). His effort was endorsed by some of the most popular abolitionist voices of the day in America, Canada, and England. For example, the introduction to the *The Tragedy* was written by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896), internationally known abolitionist and famed author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).<sup>3</sup> At the time of publication, *The Tragedy* was also widely lauded and earned the praise of powerful political and social figures such as US President William McKinley, British Prime Minister William E. Gladstone, and the presidents of educational institutions including Harvard University, Tufts University, and Amherst College along with many others (1898, p. 23).

The *Press Comments* section in the 1898 edition of *The Tragedy* offers insight into the positive reception of the text internationally. In February of 1898, the *Boston Courant* described *The Tragedy* as “intensely interesting” and “richly illustrated” (1898, p. 22). In support of Rev. Stanford's research, Rev. Francis Clark of the United Society of Christian Endeavor stated that Rev. Stanford “has done a grand work in this country and can do even a greater work on his return to England in removing prejudices and presenting the truth of some American matters to our English friends which they do not always fully understand” (1898, p. 25). Rev. Stanford wrote one of the few known historical texts published before the 20th century by a Black author centered on Black experiences diachronically. Over the course of a century, however, attention to Rev. Stanford's work has waned. Despite all the acclaim attested in the press comments and endorsements, when searching for lists of researchers and historians through the ages today, Rev. Stanford's name is not found next to white authors and historians such as Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), Henry Adams (1838-1918), and George Bancroft (1800-1891). This neglect, however, does not mean permanent erasure of *The Tragedy* and the activism of Rev. Stanford.

Over the last few years, scholars have given renewed attention to Rev. Stanford's writings and life due to his persevering impact on communities in America, Canada, and England. In 1889, Rev. Stanford became the first Black minister of Hope St. Baptist Church in Birmingham, England, known today as Highgate Baptist Church. To celebrate his contributions, scholars and community members have increasingly organized events and published new research. In 2020, Barbara McCaskill along with co-editors Sidonia Serafini and Rev. Paul Walker, published a book entitled, *The Magnificent Reverend Peter Thomas Stanford, Transatlantic Reformer and Race Man*. In 2021, I joined McCaskill, Serafini, and Walker along with an international collection of scholars to put on a conference in honor of Rev. Stanford entitled, *Black Southern Activism: A Transatlantic Legacy*.<sup>4</sup> While intended to take place in person in England and America, the event was moved online due to COVID-19. At the same time as these events, we created the Wikipedia page dedicated to Rev. Peter Thomas Stanford in order to increase awareness and access to his work. In just a few short years, there is much that we have achieved, but much more can be done to bring attention to Rev. Peter Thomas Stanford.

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<sup>3</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has been critiqued for over a century for its negative depiction of Black people, for instance by James Baldwin in his essay, “Everybody's Protest Novel” (Baldwin, 1955). During her lifetime, Harriet Beecher Stowe was criticized for her paternalistic approach to supporting Black people: for instance, in a letter from Martin Delaney to Frederick Douglass (Delaney, 1853). Acknowledging her popularity in this paper is not an endorsement of her approach to abolition.

<sup>4</sup> This project was supported and funded by an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation project grant through the Willson Center for Humanities and Arts at the University of Georgia and the Highgate Baptist Church in Birmingham, England.

The present paper explores the roles of ancient rhetoric in 19th century transatlantic abolitionist, antilynching, and antiracist literature by examining Rev. Stanford's engagement with ancient discourses in *The Tragedy*. Examples include a history of ancient colonization (1897, pp. 13-14), engagement with Herodotus' *Histories* (p. 14), reflections upon assassinated emperors (p. 72), and references to the *First Lessons in Greek* textbook by William S. Scarborough (p. 119). Alongside and interwoven with these references are biblical quotations from and allusions to the Old and New Testaments, including passages from the Book of Judges, the Epistle to the Romans, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. All these references function as part of Rev. Stanford's larger rhetorical system of persuasion intended to advance Christianity and to convince readers to support antilynching. Through a chronicle of the past, Rev. Stanford's work addressed the present but also looked to emancipatory futures for Black communities.

*The Tragedy* (1897) by Rev. Peter Thomas Stanford is just one example of how ancient rhetoric flows in and out of the intersections of education and activism in Black freedom literature. In recent years, increased attention by classical scholars has begun to improve disciplinary understandings of Black literature, especially in relation to abolition.<sup>5</sup> While such efforts have addressed the presence of classical rhetoric within the intersectional interests of liberation and education in Black traditions, there remains a wealth of material in need of further examination.<sup>6</sup> With this paper, I aim, in part, to introduce readers to the many ways in which Rev. Peter Thomas Stanford is rightfully part of this discussion, and to invite future contributions and collaborations in bringing the African American tradition to broader consciousness.

This paper is divided into five sections that provide historical background and examine ancient rhetoric in *The Tragedy* while contextualizing Rev. Stanford's work within larger patterns of abolitionist activism and education. The first two sections offer background on Rev. Stanford himself and the racist practices of the American publishing system through the centuries. The third section examines how Harriet Beecher Stowe endorsed Rev. Stanford's work by engaging with ancient discourses in her introduction to the text. The fourth section provides specific examples of classical citation within Rev. Stanford's writings. Finally, I end the paper with some pedagogical reflections on how Rev. Stanford's life and works might be taught. The overall goal of this piece is to provide readers with insight into *The Tragedy* by Rev. Peter Thomas Stanford and its place in the history of transatlantic abolition and freedom education.

### **I: A Brief Biography of Rev. Stanford**

Rev. Peter Thomas Stanford (Fig. 1) was born around the year 1858.<sup>7</sup> At birth, enslavers held him captive and kept him through his infancy and toddler years in Hampton, Virginia. These human traffickers, or, as Stanford refers to them, "flesh and blood jobbers" (1897, p. 57), had

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<sup>5</sup> e.g., Scarborough, edited by Ronnick (2005, 2006), Rankine (2006), Cook and Tatum (2010), Greenwood (2011), Malamud (2016).

<sup>6</sup> See also Brown (1849, 1851), Said (1873), and Keckley (1868). There is a great deal of scholarship still to be written on this topic and I invite any reader here to dive in and share what you find—whether you are a student, teacher, or learner of any kind.

<sup>7</sup> As with many enslaved people, his date of birth is not confidently known. For a thorough review of the possible dates and age of Rev. Stanford see the Introduction of McCaskill et al. (2020).

sold both his father and his mother by the time he was four years old. He was never reunited with them. Although not much is known about his earliest years, it is believed that, for at least a short while, Rev. Stanford lived with the Pamunkey Indian Tribe around the end of the Civil War.<sup>8</sup> In time, a young Rev. Stanford was placed in an orphanage until, at around eight years of age, the government-run Freedmen's Bureau handed Stanford over to Perry L. Stanford and his wife Hannah Stanford, a foster family in Boston (McCaskill et al., 2020). This family, however, did not bring Rev. Stanford freedom. Instead, they enslaved him once again for years to come.<sup>9</sup>

When he was around twelve years old, Rev. Stanford liberated himself by sneaking into the coal box of a train and traveling to New York City. The pre-teen Stanford had no resources at the time and lived on the streets making friends and getting by however he needed. By 1880, Rev. Stanford had built up a network of comrades and mentors, converted to Christianity, and was one of the first Black people to graduate from the Suffield Institute in Connecticut (McCaskill et al., 2020).<sup>10</sup> He then dedicated his life and writings to promoting Christianity, antislavery activism, and supporting Black communities in America, Canada, and England. In that time, not unlike today, activists like Rev. Stanford fought to spread their abolitionist message and publish their works. In order to contextualize the creation, printing, and spread of *The Tragedy*, the next section provides some historical background into the laws and practices that were designed to question and exclude Black authors, artists, and activists.

## **II: *The Tragedy* and Racist Obstruction**

Throughout the 19th century and before, many Black authors in America traveled or moved to England where they pursued their life goals and published written works, such as poetry, freedom narratives, and histories ([Wheatley] Peters, 1773;<sup>11</sup> Bayley, 1825; J. Brown, 1855). This pattern of publishing abroad was often a response to rejection, threats, and attacks by white publishers and other white people in America. White people finding new justifications for capturing and re-enslaving Black people in the wake of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act in America also spurred this model. The very titles of publications of Black authors bear witness to the need for such travel and relocation: for instance, John Brown's *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, A Fugitive Slave Now in England* (1855).<sup>12</sup> England had abolished enslavement in 1833 and had a large community of abolitionists in a

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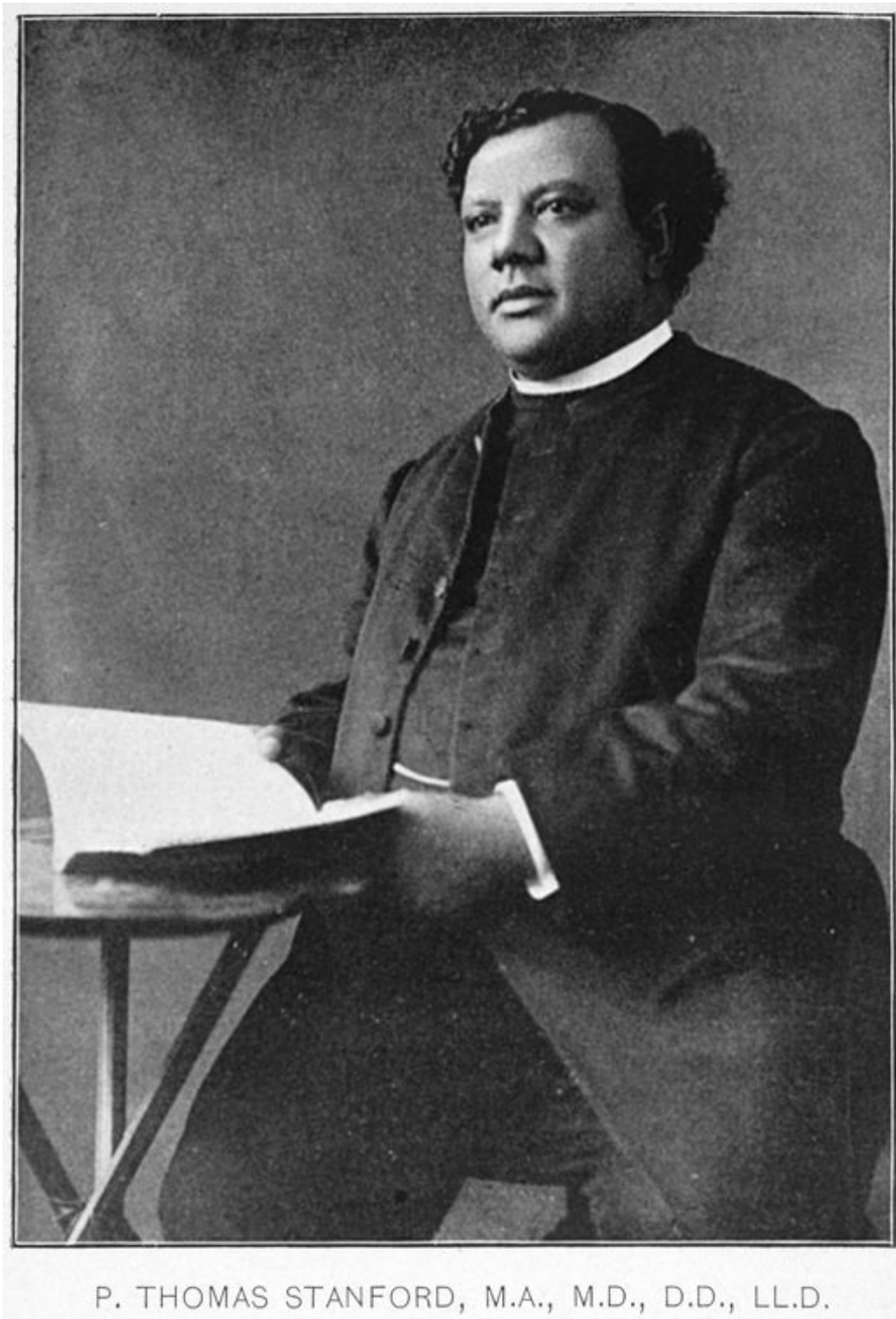
<sup>8</sup> This part of Rev. Stanford's life has been debated but evidence suggests he did live with an Indigenous community, likely the Pamunkey Indian Tribe, for about two years; see McCaskill et al. (2020), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Some may take issue with the use of the term 'enslaved' here since he was, in theory, a foster child of this family. However, the indentured servitude expected of him and many children like him is an extension of enslavement.

<sup>10</sup> Also referred to as the Connecticut Baptist Literary Institution (1833), the Connecticut Literary Institute, Suffield Literary Institute, and Suffield School. Historically, this institution trained men to be Baptist ministers. Today the school is known as Suffield Academy, a co-educational, non-denominational, private college-preparatory boarding school still in operation.

<sup>11</sup> Although Phillis [Wheatley] Peters is often cited by the name "Wheatley," that was the family name of her enslavers. Peters is the married name that she acquired herself after she obtained her freedom from enslavement. After freedom and marriage, Phillis chose to go by her name Phillis Peters and dropped Wheatley (Jeffers, 2020; Winkler, 2020). Out of respect for her choice and her life, I will do the same in my research.

<sup>12</sup> This freedom narrative is by the Black author John Brown (ca. 1810-1876), not to be confused with the white abolitionist John Brown (1800-1859).



**Fig. 1.** Photograph of Rev. Stanford (1897).

The New York Public Library Digital Collections. Public Domain.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-70bb-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>;

link accessed Feb. 10, 2024.

less hostile surrounding, helping to make the country more amenable to publishing works by Black authors.<sup>13</sup> Today, the evidence of this racist gatekeeping in American publishing is widely available in print and online. For example, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill hosts an online database entitled, *Documenting the American South*.<sup>14</sup> Here, readers can find a large collection of digitized books written by Black authors from or based in America and other countries and colonies which were still authorizing enslavement, but which were published in England.

In 1772, Phillis Peters was a nineteen-year-old enslaved African woman in Boston, Massachusetts. She had learned Greek and Latin and was writing the epic poem *To Maecenas*. In striving to get her work published, she was forced to legally defend herself from those who questioned the authorship of her poetry. Prominent white men including Thomas Hutchinson, Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress, were compelled to write in support of her abilities (Malamud, 2016). Ultimately, Peters published her book of poems in England in 1773 entitled, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral by Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley of Boston, in New England*.<sup>15</sup> This discrimination against and questioning of Black intellect is ongoing today, including and especially in predominantly white fields such as “Classics” (Henderson, 2010; Posselt, 2016; Lepisto and Murray, 2019; Padilla Peralta, 2019).

White publishers and authors heavily filtered publications by Black authors on the transatlantic antislavery circuit, whether the text was published in England or America. Evidence of gatekeeping can be found in the publications of transatlantic antislavery activists such as Henry “Box” Brown (Dugan, 2019). The first edition of his narrative was written by a white man named Charles Stearns and entitled, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery, Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery by Charles Stearns* (1849).<sup>16</sup> A few years later, Brown rewrote his own freedom narrative (1851). Charles Stearns’ edition is saturated with ancient references. In introducing Brown’s story, Stearns states that “...all whose eyes gaze upon the picture here drawn of misery, and of endurance, worthy of a Spartan, and such as a hero of olden times might be proud...” (1849, p. vi). This passage conjures up images and stereotypes about the Persian Wars, the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE, and the actions and legend of King Leonidas. Later in the text, Stearns reflects on the hypocrisy of enslavement, stating (p. 72):

It is a remnant of that spirit of barbarity, which formerly induced men to fight for conquest and territory, in the palmiest days of the ancient Eastern empires, when the fields of the earth, fair mother of our existence, were made fertile by the rich streams of blood, flowing from the mangled corpses strewn

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<sup>13</sup> England did and does have racism and discrimination. Written evidence shows, however, that many people expressed that they felt safer and chose to live in England instead of America due to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act and other atrocities (Rivington, 2022; Virdee and McGeever, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> <https://docsouth.unc.edu/>; link accessed Feb. 10, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> On the role of ancient Hellenic and Roman discourses in Peters’ works, see Fikes (2002b), Greenwood (2011), Lamore and Shields, eds. (2011).

<sup>16</sup> Digitized by Google books: [https://www.google.com/books/edition/Narrative\\_of\\_H\\_B\\_Brown\\_who\\_escaped\\_from/prxcAAAACAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Narrative_of_H_B_Brown_who_escaped_from/prxcAAAACAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1); link accessed Feb. 10, 2024.

upon its surface, by the fiendish barbarity of a Sennacherib, a Cyrus, a Xerxes, and an Alexander.<sup>17</sup>

Stearns mixes ancient Assyrian, Persian, Macedonian, and Greek imagery—including an allusion to Achilles clogging the river Xanthus with corpses and chariots in Homer’s *Iliad* Book 21.<sup>18</sup> In Stearns’ version of Brown’s narrative, there are also multiple mentions of the sword of Damocles, as well as references to the laws of Draco, the assassination of Caesar, and the association of the death of the goddess, Libertas, with the passage of the Stamp Act, as well as many other allusions and references to antiquity.<sup>19</sup>

Following its publication, Stearns’ account of Brown’s freedom narrative was heavily criticized in book reviews for its overwrought style. The September 22, 1849 weekly publication of *Christian Register* states, “We wish the compiler had not worked the matter up quite as much, and had given it in a style of greater veri-similitude, more simplicity and better taste, and mixed it less up with irrelevant matter.” In response, Brown wrote his own narrative in 1851 and had it published in Manchester, England. By this time, fearing re-enslavement due to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, Brown had left America for England and lived there for the next twenty-five years of his life (Ruggles, 2003; Howard, 2021). The title of Brown’s edition is simply, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself*. The inclusion of the phrase “written by himself” is a strong declaration of his agency over his own story and a departure from the earlier version. Notably, in Brown’s edition, there were hardly any classical references except in the poem featured on the title page:

Forget not the unhappy,  
Though sorrow may annoy,  
There’s something then for memory,  
Hereafter to enjoy!  
Oh! still from Fortune’s garland,  
Some flowers for others strew;  
And forget not the unhappy,  
For, ah! their friends are few.

This poem was written by Charles Swain (1801-1874), a white English author and contemporary of Brown. In this passage, the capitalization of Fortune indicates a personification of fate and suggests a connection to the Roman goddess Fortuna. Fortuna is the goddess of chance and fate including the fate of enslaved and freed people, and ancient narratives regularly invoke Fortuna as the divinity who converts free men into enslaved men

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<sup>17</sup> Sennacherib (ca. 745-681 BCE), king of Assyria who campaigned against Babylonians; Cyrus (ca. 600-530 BCE), founder of the First Persian Empire; Xerxes (ca. 519-465 BCE), king of Persia; Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE).

<sup>18</sup> *Iliad* 21.15-16.

<sup>19</sup> Sword of Damocles: “O reader, have you no heart to sympathize with the injured slave, as he thus lives in a state of perpetual torment, the dread uncertainty of his wife’s fate, continually hanging over his head, and poisoning all his joys, as the naked sword hung by a *hair*, over the head of an ancient king’s guest, as he was seated at a table loaded with all the luxuries of an epicure’s devising? This sword, unlike the one alluded to, did often pierce my breast, and when I had recovered from the wound, it was again hung up, to torture me. This is slavery, a natural and concomitant part of the accursed system!” (1849, pp. 48-49); cf. Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* 5.61. Laws of Draco: “This people had just emerged from the depths of Egyptian slavery, and might have stood in need of such severe and terrible laws, so Draconic in their nature; but the refined inhabitants of polished Greece and Rome, needed not such barbarous enactments” (pp. 70-71). Assassination of Caesar: pp. 85-86. Libertas and the Stamp Act: p. 84f.

(e.g., Plautus' *Captivi* 304-305). Fortuna represents, just as other deities do, a theistic agency in the lives of humans, and as such, her association with enslavement and emancipation sends the message that those who are enslaved are there by the will of the gods, and not by the actions of mankind. As a result, Fortuna's role in abolitionist discourse can be interpreted as an effort to downplay the role of human agency in systems of mass enslavement. In the context of enslavement, Fortuna's power diminishes the agency of white people in enslaving Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities. Interestingly, no other explicit allusions to antiquity, outside of biblical references, are included in this second edition of Brown's narrative, an abrupt shift compared to the 1849 first edition written by Stearns—and an indication that classical references had come to be associated with white authorship.

Five decades after Brown's narratives, Rev. Stanford published *The Tragedy* (1897). This text is believed to have been written mostly by Rev. Stanford and not as heavily filtered by white authors, artists, and publishers as Brown's writing had been. However, the presence of white gatekeeping in the publishing process is still visible. For example, the introduction of *The Tragedy* was written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, a white woman and author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Harriet Beecher Stowe and her family are also credited with funding the education of Rev. Stanford (McCaskill et al., 2020). Her words in the introduction, as examined in the next section, illustrate how her statements function as stamps of approval on a work written by a Black man. Therefore, although the first edition of *The Tragedy* was published in America and written by Rev. Stanford himself over thirty years after the Civil War ended, it still stands as an example of a text that, at least in part, was filtered and approved by white American authors, leaders, and audiences.

### **III: The Introduction to *The Tragedy***

The introduction to *The Tragedy* was written by author and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896). Stowe was an educated white woman from Connecticut who studied Latin, religion, literature, and other subjects, particularly during her time at the Hartford Female Seminary (Hedrick, 1994). The audience for her books, poems, and other writings were mostly other educated white people who had likewise been steeped in allusions to classical and biblical texts. Given her educational background, interests, and audience, Stowe, unsurprisingly, includes allusions to ancient authors and texts in her introduction to *The Tragedy*.

Situating Stowe's contributions to Rev. Stanford's text in the context of the whiteness of contemporary systems of education brings insight into the functions and structure of her prefatory statements. The formal American higher education system began in the 1600s, and, from its inception, was constructed by white people in ways that mostly served other white people. As these modes of discrimination were being constructed and embedded, leading American institutions of higher education such as Harvard (1632), the College of William & Mary (1693), and Yale (1701) designed their curriculum around classical and biblical texts (Geiger, 2016). As a result of this system, modeled upon English and German educational institutions, Greek and Latin as well as theological education increasingly became synonymous with white education in many contexts in America and abroad. Simultaneously, enslaved Black people were banned from learning, reading, preaching, and community organizing. Therefore, in time, the practice of citing Greek and Latin texts as well as the Bible



became a signifier not only of education but of white knowledge systems.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, Harriet Beecher Stowe's references in the introduction of *The Tragedy* perform her white American identity through the citation of material which had become central to the contemporary curriculum. Her references to ancient authors and texts are expected (indeed, to some extent, generic) and not unusual for any author or presenter on the transatlantic antislavery circuit during her lifetime, regardless of race or gender.

Stowe begins the introduction to *The Tragedy* by distinguishing between tragedies that are "authorized" and those that are "unauthorized"—with which terms she described "violence *authorized* and made *legal* by men in whom power was vested" (1897, p. 3). In this process, she identifies the massacres of Armenians by Turkish forces in the 1890s as "authorized," stating, "This is an authorized, not an unauthorized, tragedy, which the whole world knows but has not yet been outraged enough to stop it" (p. 4). Stowe then compares that contemporaneous genocide to the ongoing enslavement of Black people in America (pp. 4-5):

In America,—which is known as the land of the free, whose people are rightly proud of a history that speaks of a noble, victorious struggle against tyranny; of the wisdom, foresight, and piety of the founders of the States; of the marvellous energy which transformed vast plains and forests into fields [p. 5] of wealth creating grain and fruit, built cities, established manufactures, and made a large sphere of art and science;—a long and revolting tragedy has been in progress, in which the Negro has suffered [sic] indescribable misery and been afflicted with diabolical torture. This also was a tragedy *authorized* by the powers that were, was recognized and defined by law, and endorsed and supported by not a few churches and religious teachers, in which the Negro was bound with chains, whipped with the lash, treated as a beast, sold in the common market as a thing, and, when he was no longer worth money, hurried to death and buried anyhow.

In identifying America as the "land of the free," Stowe identifies an essential and cruel irony in the construction of American freedom narratives which has been recently underscored by Barbara and Karen Fields ([2012] 2014, p. 11) as an "anomalous reality":

The French Revolution assigned universal validity to the slogan *Liberté! Egalité! Fraternité!* By contrast, America's rendering of the same sentiments added asterisks, for it had to make sense of an anomalous reality: the presence of native-born people who were "foreign," hard-working people who were not free.

Stowe goes on to explain that freedom itself can create "unauthorized" tragedies such as the withholding of land and resources to the formerly enslaved (1897, p. 6: "Free, it is true, but untaught, homeless, moneyless, a stranger in a land whose people loved him not"). Stowe concludes her introduction by pleading for peace and equality with a citation of the Lord's Prayer, discussed below (p. 6), and ends her contribution by asserting that Rev. Stanford's words are true and ought to be believed by the readers (p. 9). In what follows, I offer an examination of the ancient rhetoric in Stowe's introduction, including biblical and non-biblical references.

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<sup>20</sup> Greeks and Italians in Stowe's time were not themselves considered to be white, a racial categorization that shifted in America during the mid-20th century (Painter, 2010).

When classicists examine primary sources, biblical references are often categorized separately, or omitted altogether, yet this attitude speaks more to the limitations of disciplinary boundaries which elevate Greek and Latin literature over contemporary evidence from the textual traditions of Christianity. Jesus, after all, lived in the Roman Empire. The use of both biblical and classical references from antiquity by authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Rev. Peter Thomas Stanford illustrate how 19th century authors perceived Christian and classical texts to be related and overlapping. Accordingly, I consider biblical references to be references to antiquity and therefore include them alongside other examples that are traditionally categorized as “classical” discourses.

Stowe illustrates her Christian beliefs and knowledge while she works to persuade and educate the readers who may be convinced by her words and the words of Rev. Stanford to support abolition and antilynching. In the introduction, she quotes directly from biblical scripture to support her pleas for change. For example, she reminds her readers that the fight to oppress and maintain power over others is a violation of the messages in the Bible by citing Proverbs 14:31, “He that oppreseth the poor reproacheth his Maker” (p. 8). In the following paragraph, Stowe expresses hope for equality in America by invoking the Lord’s Prayer from Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4 stating, “Yet a little while, and surely, the righteous people of the States will once more make an effort, an effort of peace, in the name of ‘Our Father who art in heaven’” (p. 8).

Stowe’s non-biblical ancient references in the introduction are more indirect than her explicit citation of scripture. For example, she ends her chapter by stating that Rev. Stanford’s *The Tragedy* is a “little book, which pretends only to be a report of inquiries made” (p. 9). The use of the term “little book” brings to mind Catullus’ self-conscious representation of his own poetry (1.1: *cui dono lepidum novum libellum...?*, “to whom do I dedicate this charming little book?”), with Stowe’s introduction to Stanford’s work in some ways mirroring the structure of literary dedication and reciprocity between Catullus and Cornelius Nepos (1.3-7). Stowe’s reference to Stanford’s “little book” also echoes the words of Ovid’s *Tristia* (1.1), where the poet begins by addressing his text as *parve...liber*, “small book.” Catullus and Ovid performed ironic self-deprecation in order to initiate their own poetic endeavors, and Stowe’s use of the phrase “little book” likewise demonstrates a sense of initiatory humility (*The Tragedy* is, after all, two-hundred and thirty pages long). Yet, given the fact that Stowe was writing on behalf of Stanford, her “self”-deprecation instantiated an appropriative and white-paternalistic ventriloquism of the true author’s voice.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the “report of inquiries made” phrase in Stowe’s passage above harkens back to the very opening words of Herodotus’ *Histories* (1.1):

Ἡροδότου Ἁλικαρνησέος ἱστορίας ἀπόδεξις ἦδε, ὡς μήτε τὰ γενόμενα ἐξ ἀνθρώπων τῷ χρόνῳ ἐξίτηλα γένηται...

This is a report of inquiry by Herodotus of Halicarnassus, created so that what has happened will not be forgotten in time...

In this well-known passage at the beginning of the *Histories*, Herodotus refers to his text as a “report of inquiry” (ἱστορίας ἀπόδεξις) just as Stowe defines Rev. Stanford’s text as a “report of inquiries made.” Herodotus (ca. 484-425 BCE) was a Greek historian who wrote the *Histories* about the Persian Wars and has been called the “father of history” since antiquity. *The*

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<sup>21</sup> It is noteworthy, too, that Ovid anthropomorphizes his “small book” (*parvus liber*) in order to send it on a journey and speak on his own behalf, structurally mirroring the relationship between a Roman enslaver and his enslaved messenger.

*Tragedy* is both a historical text and an antilynching treatise. By positioning Rev. Stanford's *The Tragedy* in the legacy of Herodotus' *Histories*, Stowe signifies to the audience that this research deserves to be read and respected. This connection to ancient history is supported by her further engagement with the other "father of history," Thucydides (ca. 460-400 BCE). After her nod to Herodotus, Stowe writes the following (p. 9):

The writer aims not at sensation, but desires first to see for himself the facts in their true light, and, having seen, give to his readers an unexaggerated statement thereof. No cause is assisted by falsehood; no race of men can be permanently helped forward by fraud.

Here, Stowe, in stating that Rev. Stanford is not a liar, echoes a persistent concern of ancient historiography, namely that a historical account appropriately distinguish between a truth and a falsehood, or a "lie." This assertion of truth reverberates Thucydides' claim in *The Peloponnesian War* (1.21.1) that in examining evidence he set himself apart from poets and writers who arranged their words to be more attractive to hear than honest. With this reference in the introduction, Stowe thus encourages those readers who would recognize the nod to Thucydides to see Rev. Stanford as a modern-day fact-based Thucydides who cares about the evidence.

By invoking both Herodotus and Thucydides as she praises the research and writings of Rev. Stanford, Stowe associates him with two ancient historians revered particularly by white American and European readers. Combining references to Herodotus and Thucydides in the introduction, however, does more than give a tip o' the hat to the ancient historians and celebrate Rev. Stanford's achievements. These allusions to antiquity signify Stowe's own authority to the audience and serve to strengthen the weight of her endorsement of Rev. Stanford. Additionally, Harriet Beecher Stowe's identities as a well-known educated white woman author and abolitionist in America, in conjunction with her invocations of biblical scripture, Latin poetry, and Greek history, function to "legitimize" the writings of Rev. Peter Thomas Stanford. Although she did not write Rev. Stanford's text, her introduction to Stanford's *Tragedy* still illustrates the filtering and control that white people attempt(ed) to have over Black messages and literature (see Sekora, 1987).

#### **IV: Ancient Rhetoric in *The Tragedy***

*The Tragedy* consists of twelve chapters across two-hundred and thirty pages (see Fig. 2 below for Table of Contents). Rev. Stanford's rich, persuasive style brings in ancient, historical, modern, biblical, and non-biblical references. In this way, the text is a collection of abolitionist arguments set in historical prose. As Rev. Stanford declares on the dedication page, he carried out this research and composition "in the hope of helping create a strong, healthy public opinion that will make it impossible for outrages and lynchings to be much longer continued" (Stanford, 1897). In Chapter 8, simply titled "Lynchings," Rev. Stanford shares the horrifying stories of the murder of Black people including Dr. Rosamore Carmier, George Swaysie, Lou Stevens, and an unnamed Black woman falsely accused of poisoning a white woman (pp. 137-168). He also provides a chart of lynchings from 1882-1897 showing a substantial increase in the number of recorded lynchings: from 50 lynchings a year to over 200 by 1893, and a count of at least 40 Black people murdered in 1897 by the time of the publishing of *The Tragedy* (pp. 137-138). This type of recording of statistics is vitally important for conducting research on abolition today. Throughout the text, Rev. Stanford warns his audience that there will be more consequences for the violence and hatred against Black

**Fig. 2** *The Tragedy*: Table of Contents

Chapter 1	Introductory
Chapter 2	Africa: And How the Negro Was Brought Thence, and Why
Chapter 3	America: And What Befell the Negro Therein from AD 1619 to AD 1712
Chapter 4	How the Negro Was Treated Down to 1844
Chapter 5	John Brown
Chapter 6	Immediately Before and After Emancipation
Chapter 7	The Beginning of Better Days, and of Progress
Chapter 8	Lynchings
Chapter 9	The Negro of the North
Chapter 10	The Negro of the South
Chapter 11	The Negro of the South, and His Friends
Chapter 12	Conclusion

people. The structure, content, and message of Rev. Stanford's work illustrate an unwavering pursuit of justice and social change with an emphasis on Black history and life.

The first chapter in *The Tragedy* is the introduction that was written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, as discussed in the previous section. Rev. Stanford's research and observations begin in the second chapter, entitled, "Africa: And How the Negro was Brought Thence, and Why." At the beginning of this chapter, Rev. Stanford states that what is happening to Black people is wrong and that there are, and will continue to be, repercussions for this inhumanity. These two points are revisited throughout the text and are supported by his references to historical events and biblical scripture. The following passage on Phoenician colonization from Chapter 2 is the first example of ancient rhetoric written by Rev. Stanford in the body of *The Tragedy* (p. 13):

The Phoenicians, who lived in cities on the coast of Syria, one of which was ancient Tyre, were devoted to the pursuit of the sea, and established colonies on the north coast of Africa, and created extensive commerce. It is said of them that they were the first people to circumnavigate Africa, and that Necho, who ascended the throne of Egypt in the year 617, B.C. was the navigator.

In this passage, Rev. Stanford discusses the role of Phoenicians in the colonization of Africa in antiquity. Rev. Stanford's phrase "it is said..." offers no citation for his statements on this colonization, but echoes an ancient practice of asserting common knowledge through phrases such as *feruntur/dicitur*, "these things are said"/"it is said."<sup>22</sup> However, the next ancient reference makes clear that Herodotus is a main resource for Rev. Stanford and likely the source of this observation on early colonization. In *Histories* 4.42, Herodotus discusses King Necho and his command over Phoenician ships that led to the discovery of Libya, the

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<sup>22</sup> The so-called "Alexandrian footnote," on which see Hinds (1998), p.2.

ancient Greek term for “Africa,” a name which did not come into use until later.<sup>23</sup> Immediately after the above passage, Rev. Stanford states (p. 14):

Herodotus, who was born in the year 484, B.C. was the first Greek who traveled in quest of distant lands and the founder of Grecian geography. He explored Egypt as far as the Cataracts of the Nile, and made excursions into Lybia [sic] and Arabia, and subsequently wrote accurate descriptions of the countries he visited.

Although Rev. Stanford identifies Herodotus as widely traveled, many scholars today, and even some ancient authors in the past, strongly doubt that Herodotus actually visited many of the places he wrote about. One reason for this doubt is that Herodotus wrote material that was at times exaggerated and othering, which combined myth and geography (Zali, 2018). Regardless, Herodotus serves as an important authority for Rev. Stanford, who invokes him as an ancient writer whose curiosity about the world beyond Greece or Europe extended to ancient Africa.<sup>24</sup> In citing Herodotus, Rev. Stanford not only “proved” the credential of his own education, but, importantly, demonstrated the presence of Africa in antiquity at a time when Africa as a site of cultural or intellectual production was consistently denied. As a result, Rev. Stanford not only associated himself with Herodotus as a fellow historian but also used the ancient material as a resource for his own research on the history of colonization and enslavement.

Throughout *The Tragedy*, like many of his time, Rev. Stanford interweaves biblical and non-biblical quotations and historical events to support his position. In Chapter 2, Rev. Stanford explains that he sees skin color as the most distinguishing feature among people but this visible element of humanity is not a marker of value. After declaring his position, Rev. Stanford finds support via the Acts of the Apostles, which reads at 17:26, “...God ‘hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth’” (1897, p. 17). The narratives in Acts, a New Testament book that continues the story of the spread of Christianity under the Roman Empire, illustrate the deep and inextricable link between the Bible and ancient cultures and communities. Rev. Stanford’s quotation reminds the reader that, according to some interpretations, the Bible itself teaches unity and equity without regard to skin color. Rev. Stanford was a Christian minister, and his intended audience includes many Christians, and so his citation of biblical evidence urged Christians to consider how their own doctrine argued for the sanctity of Black life. The use of biblical quotations to support inclusion and equality in Christianity appears frequently in many Black freedom narratives such as in the chapter entitled “Fear of Insurrection” in Harriet A. Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). There, Jacobs recounts how Black people were denied the opportunity to gather together for fear that they would unite against enslavers. Instead, Black worshipers were invited to take part in communion at white churches while the minister attempted to promote equity citing Matthew 23:8-11, “God is your Father, and all ye are brethren” (1861, p. 104).

Along with biblical quotations, Rev. Stanford brings in contemporaneous events to further support his statements. Also in Chapter 2, Rev. Stanford asserts that there will be consequences for enslavement and lynching. He identifies the Civil War among other events classified as “tragedies” as past examples of retribution. Rev. Stanford also states that the

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<sup>23</sup> Derbew (2022), pp. 10-12.

<sup>24</sup> On Herodotus’ Book 3 and the Persian/Egyptian/Aithiopian ethnographers, who define ethnic identity by mutual observation, see Derbew (2022), ch. 4.

Portuguese have “long since received the recoiling punishment of wrong doing, and are today among the weakest and poorest nations of the world” (1897, p. 16). He then reflects on how the introduction of the Portuguese human trafficking system disrupted the conversion of African people to Christianity. In his analysis of Portuguese-led enslavement practices, Rev. Stanford embeds the story of an unnamed woman who volunteered to marry an African king in Benin in order to help spread Christianity. Rev. Stanford rejects this type of effort to expand Christianity and states, “Men cannot preach the Kingdom of God, establish colonies in peace, prosperity and social order, and at the same time buy and sell, or steal and sell, flesh and blood” (p. 20). Here too we find a parallel between Rev. Stanford and the writings of Harriet A. Jacobs (1861) who, in her freedom narrative, asks the question directly, “Are doctors of divinity blind, or are they just hypocrites?” (p. 113-114).

Immediately after his statements on the hypocrisy of Christian enslavers, Rev. Stanford offers a quote from Matthew 6:24 which states, “Ye cannot serve God and Mammon” (1897, p. 20). Mammon is a term meaning “wealth” of debated etymological origin (Lat. *mammona*; Gk. μαμωνᾶς; Ara. مَمُونَة [*mamona*]; cf. Heb. מָמוֹן [*mamon*]; Oxford English Dictionary). Rev. Stanford is warning his readers through ancient and modern references that enslavement and the pursuit of wealth will have consequences. His admonishment continues when he explains that enslavement is “a tragedy whose end is not death to all concerned; a tragedy whose clearest fact is fire, the fire of cleansing and deliverance. It is strange that men will so depart from virtue and plunge so deeply into sin, when they know that catastrophe must follow” (p. 24). The power of his rebuke and seriousness with which he takes his duty is a hallmark of Rev. Stanford’s style.

In Chapter 5, “John Brown,” Rev. Stanford continues his chronicle of enslavement by sharing the life and death of abolitionist John Brown (1800-1859). He praises the activist for his dedication and sacrifice and shares details about Brown’s attempt to liberate enslaved people in Harper’s Ferry, Virginia in 1859.<sup>25</sup> After Brown was hastily captured, tried, and convicted for this attempt, he awaited his death sentence in prison and wrote letters to his friends and loved ones. In *The Tragedy*, Rev. Stanford quotes from a letter by John Brown to a minister, dated November 15, 1859, in which Brown states, “...for God’s plan was infinitely better, no doubt, or I should have kept my own. Had Samson kept to his determination of not telling Delilah wherein his great strength lay, he would probably have never overturned the house” (p. 65). Here, Brown is referring to the biblical story of Samson and Delilah from the Book of Judges 13-16. Samson, a powerful Nazirite leader, revealed to his lover Delilah, a spy for the Philistines, that the source of his strength was his hair. Delilah betrayed Samson; his hair was cut off, and he was captured by the Philistines. However, Samson’s hair regrew. And, while in custody, Samson received permission to go to the temple where, with his renewed strength, he collapsed the building killing, himself along with the Philistines inside, thereby becoming a heroic figure of liberation to many.

In the letter cited by Rev. Stanford, Brown likens himself to Samson. Although Samson’s original plan was to keep his secret about his hair, by changing his plans, and through his suffering, he was able to fulfill his destiny, destroy the Philistines, and save others. Brown too had changed his plans for the liberation in Harper’s Valley and was captured. Over the course of a few years, delays and location changes impacted the original scheme. The Commonwealth of Virginia hung John Brown on December 2, 1859. In the letter, Brown expressed hope that this was meant to happen, just as Samson’s capture and death was meant

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<sup>25</sup> Now known as Harpers Valley, West Virginia.

to be, and that his martyrdom would accelerate the end of enslavement. Rev. Stanford shares this quote from Brown's letter as he honors his sacrifice and reflects on the rise of the Civil War that followed shortly after. The inclusion of personal letters and correspondence in antislavery texts can be found in other 19th century works such as Louisa Picquet's 1861 freedom narrative, which includes a chapter entitled "Letters from the Slave Mother." At the time, Picquet was negotiating the purchase of her mother's freedom. In one of the letters, her mother states, "I would giv [sic] this world to see you and my sweet little children; may God bless you my Dear child and protect you is my prayer" (Picquet, 1861, p. 31). Louisa Picquet's narrative helped her to free her mother, and these letters remain a testament to the heartbreak and pain they suffered as a family enslaved.

In addition to biblical references and personal correspondences, Rev. Stanford directly discusses Black classical scholars, including William Sanders Scarborough.<sup>26</sup> In Chapter 7, "The Beginning of Better Days, and of Progress," Rev. Stanford celebrates the achievements of Black people and directly argues against stereotypes of laziness and lack of intellect, just as the Black women educators Anna Julia Cooper (1892) and Fanny Jackson Coppin (1913) did. He provides statistics on Black wealth<sup>27</sup> and recounts many Black inventors, authors, and educators such as Landrow Bell, Thomas J. Martin, and Phillis Peters. In regard to education and literature, Rev. Stanford states, "when we find the schools of Ohio using a Greek Grammar for beginners, written by W.S. Scarborough, a coloured man, of Wilberforce, Ohio, we can and do say that the natural incapacity theory is destroyed" (1897, p. 119). Rev. Stanford praises Scarborough for his achievements and considers him an example of Black success.

Rev. Stanford's praise of Scarborough and his *First Lessons in Greek* (1881) textbook is a testament to Scarborough's reach and reputation. Additionally, this reference is another indicator that knowledge of Greek and Latin was still considered a signifier of intelligence and education, just as it had been in the 1600s during the early years in the construction of the American higher education system. Enslavers kept William S. Scarborough (1852-1926), like Rev. Stanford, in captivity at birth. After the Emancipation Proclamation near the end of the Civil War, Scarborough was free to pursue his educational dreams (Scarborough, 2005; 2006). Scarborough then went on to study Greek and Latin at Atlanta University and Oberlin College, becoming a Professor of Classics and President of Wilberforce University.

In Chapter 11 of *The Tragedy*, "The Negro of the South, and His Friends," Rev. Stanford continues to shift his focus from pain and tragedy to hope and potential. In the conclusion of the chapter, he cites Romans 13:12 ("the night is far spent"; 1897, p. 226) in reference to the centuries of enslavement and oppression. Rev. Stanford ends *The Tragedy* with a short summary and dreams for the future in Chapter 12, "Conclusion." In this chapter, he pleads for religious leaders to get on the same page and have "one accord" (p. 229) as they speak their sermons, write their publications, and address the public. For Stanford, liberation for Black communities was inherently tied to religious belief: he asserts that Christianity is a necessity for Black people, one which would "result in enlargement of their wisdom and

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<sup>26</sup> On William Sanders Scarborough and other African American classical scholars of his era, see Ronnick (1997, 2000a, 2000b, 2004) and Fikes (2002b).

<sup>27</sup> Notably, before and after Rev. Stanford's comments, there were efforts by white communities to intentionally destroy Black wealth and united communities such as the Colfax massacre (1873), Wilmington massacre (1898), Tulsa massacre (1921), Rosewood massacre (1923), Linnentown destruction (1960s), MOVE bombing (1985), etc.

power” (p. 230). As he pens his aspirations, he quotes Matthew 7:7, “Ask and ye shall receive; seek and ye shall find; knock and the door shall be opened unto you” (p. 230). His final declarations include his dream of getting antilynching laws passed and his desire to spread a unified message of peace and humanity. However, it would take until the 2022 Emmett Till Antilynching Act, one hundred and twenty-five years after Rev. Stanford wrote *The Tragedy*, for such a law to be passed.

Each of the examples from *The Tragedy* provided above function to support Rev. Stanford's position that hatred against Black people and lynching in America must end. He pulls together ancient, historical, and modern discourses to persuade his audience that ending enslavement and lynching is right and in line with scripture. His work is as much pro-Christian as it is antilynching. Given the context of white education, the largely white audiences on the antislavery circuit in America and England, and the statements of purpose by the authors themselves, the evidence shows that Harriet Beecher Stowe and Rev. Stanford invoked ancient Mediterranean texts and imagery in *The Tragedy* in order to encourage empathy and to promote abolition among educated audiences of white Christian readers in America and Britain, who were inclined to recognize and respond to classical references as well as biblical scripture. The result is a rhetorical text that is both a historical account and an antilynching treatise which was praised by some of the most powerful figures in the world during its time, but neglected by many others for decades to come.

## **V: Teaching Implications and Conclusion**

Lynching did not end in Rev. Stanford's time nor has it ended today. Until very recently, no federal definition or law existed in regard to lynching. In March of 2022, part of Rev. Stanford's dream was finally fulfilled with the passing of the Emmett Till Antilynching Act (Shear, 2022). The law is named after Emmett Till (1941-1955), a fourteen-year-old Black boy whom two white men lynched in Mississippi after a white woman named Carolyn Bryant falsely accused him of sexual harassment at a local grocery store. Contributing to the widespread support for the bill is the public outrage over the continued murders of Black people in America now, including George Floyd (1973-2020), Ahmaud Arbery (1994-2020), Breonna Taylor (1993-2020), and so many others.

When considered together, the 1897 research on lynching by Rev. Stanford, the 1955 lynching murder of Emmett Till, and the 2022 signing of the Emmett Till Antilynching Act illustrate how deep and far back the fight for justice, change, and reparations goes. In June of 2022, a seventy-year-old arrest warrant was found for Carolyn Bryant who had falsely accused Emmett Till and conspired to murder him. Bryant is still alive at the age of 88 at the time of this writing. With the discovery of the warrant, Emmett Till's family and many other people called for her apprehension (Bella and Brown, 2022). In August of 2022, however, a grand jury declined to indict Bryant, an act that has left many angry and shocked (Somasundaram, 2022). This story is not over and the fight for abolition and antilynching continues.

One challenge in this endeavor is that, in order to go further with the conversation and take action in ancient studies, we need many more people to engage in this type of research. Teaching and analyzing the works of Rev. Stanford in the classroom, including discussing and contextualizing the content and structure, can go a long way. Courses on history, literature, language, religion, and education are all possible contexts. Entry points into his work can include activities on ancient rhetoric, abolition, Black literature, and Christianity. There is space for critique and examination of paternalistic views toward Africa and African



people as well as an analysis of historical accuracy. Although some of the messages bring up serious difficulties within abolitionist and antilynching discourses, this too is an arena for fruitful discussion.

Rev. Stanford has not traditionally been called a “classicist” nor would I argue for that label today. However, he clearly was educated in and engaged with ancient rhetoric. By including him in the conversations on activism, education, and ancient studies, we broaden our field, our own knowledge, and the potential for future research and education. Concluding her analysis of ancient reception in the work of the Vietnamese educator and author Phạm Duy Khiêm (1908-1974), Kelly Nguyen (2020) writes that he sought to educate French audiences about Vietnamese culture and “carved out a third space for himself, one that challenges conventional ideas and transcends categories.” I believe that Rev. Stanford did the same. He used classical and biblical rhetoric to connect to people and to educate them on the history and experiences of Black people, to uplift international communities, and to navigate the colonialist terrain with the resources he had.

The purpose of this research is not to prove that the abolitionist rhetoric of early Black literature is legitimate or worthy of value simply because of the presence of classical references. Nor is the goal to extract classical references from Black literary traditions for study outside of the context of their use by such traditions. And it is not meant to show that Rev. Peter Thomas Stanford was surprising because he was a Black man who engaged with ancient literature. So many Black people have done the same before, during, and since his time. All those goals serve white ends and egos. Instead, my intention has been to provide readers with more information and the tools to enter these discourses and continue learning and teaching about the long history of ancient rhetoric at the intersection of activism and education, particularly in Black literature. There is so much more to be done and we need more learners and educators to carry this work forward.

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