CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION: WHITE ABOLITIONISM AND ENGLISH WOMEN'S PROTEST WRITING IN THE 1790S

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In this paper I wish to examine two overlapping areas of middle-class polemic from the 1790s: white abolitionism and English women's protest writing. A certain polarization has crept into recent discussions of abolitionism, with some critics arguing that a relatively benign "cultural racism" in the eighteenth century came to be supplanted by a more aggressive biological racism.¹ Patrick Brantlinger, for instance, characterizes late eighteenth-century abolitionist writing as more "positive" and "open-minded" about Africa and Africans than the racist and evolutionary accounts that were to follow in the wake of Victorian social science; in his view, the Victorians must bear responsibility for inventing the myth of Africa as the Dark Continent.² But while abolitionism may have taken its roots in philanthropy and a new-found enthusiasm for the universal rights of man, the many tracts it spawned contradict such a clear-cut distinction between the earlier and later periods. In its luridness and violence, late eighteenth-century anti-slavery rhetoric points directly, for instance, to the systematic colonization of Africa; it is also rich in the sorts of phobias and bogeys more commonly associated with the later nineteenth century, such as miscegenation, cannibalism, and an essentialist stereotyping of sex and race, such as the perception of white woman's sexuality as a form of degenerate black sexuality.

The close association of woman in this earlier period with slavery, luxury, sexual license, and violent cruelty intersects problematically with the second area of oppositional rhetoric I wish to examine: women's protest writing. In seeking to capitalize upon fashionable anti-slavery rhetoric for their own political objectives, women only increased the general murkiness of abolitionist rhetoric, an effect most evident in their employment of the emotive but cliched analogy between their own disenfranchised lot and the plight of enslaved Africans. While these late eighteenth century women both anticipate and confirm Frederick Douglass's claim, in mid nineteenth-century America, that "the cause of the slave has been peculiarly woman's cause," their writings also reveal clearly why any political link between white women and black people

was doomed to be a bitter misalliance.³ As bell hooks has argued, in an essay on the history of racism and feminism in America, the analogy between white women and blacks is a deeply conservative one, concerned to uphold and maintain the racial hierarchy that grants white women a higher status than black people.⁴

My first text is a lecture Coleridge delivered in Bristol in 1795, advertised in the *Bristol Mercury* as "A Lecture on the Slave Trade, and the duties that result from its continuance."⁵ Although the fight for abolition of the trade had not yet been decisively lost, the impetus had slowed markedly from the heyday of protest in the period 1789–1792. That heyday is probably best illustrated by the immense popularity and circulation of Wedgwood's design of the manacled and supplicating slave, doubly captured by chains and by discourse, with the ventriloquized Christian motto floating above his head: "Am I not a man and a brother" (Fig. 1). Janus-faced, the motto stands curiously open to a positive or negative response, a reflection perhaps of the white racist spectre that often underlies sentimental ideals of equality between white and black: the spectre of too close a blood kinship, the term "brother" reading literally rather than figuratively in a nightmare confusion of the races through interracial sex.⁶ Nevertheless, thousands of seals and cameos with this design were sold or given away gratis; women wore it as pins in their hair, men sported the design on rings, on shirt-pins, or coat-buttons.

The waning of enthusiasm in the mid 1790s was principally caused by the reactionary climate of suspicion and fear generated by the Pitt government. By the time Coleridge made his somewhat belated contribution, abolitionism had begun to lose its respectability, and in some quarters, was even associated with jacobinism. In a daring jest at the end of his lecture, Coleridge flirts with that association between anti-slavery and revolutionism by enjoying, rhetorically, the dangers of the pro-slavers' too easy identification of England's labouring poor with the West Indian slaves. Although he does not mention the recent and bloody revolts on Santo Domingo and other West Indian islands, they clearly form the back-drop to his joking:

I have heard another argument in favor of the Slave Trade, namely, that the Slaves are as well off as the Peasantry in England! Now this argument I have [seen] in publications on the Subject—and were I the attorney General, I should *certainly* have prosecuted the author for sedition & treasonable Writings. For I appeal to common sense whether to affirm that the Slaves are as well off as our Peasantry, be

Figure 1. Erasmus Darwin. *The Botanic Garden: Part 1. Containing The Economy of Vegetation. A Poem. With Philosophical Notes* (London: J. Johnson, 1789), facing, 87. By permission of the Rare Book Room, Fisher Library, University of Sydney.

not the same as to assert that our Peasantry are as bad off as Negro Slaves—and whether if the Peasantry believed it there is a man amongst them who [would] not rebel? and be justified in Rebellion? (*LST*, 250–51)

Daring though this was in 1795, if we return to the title of Coleridge's lecture, we note that this is a lecture "on" and not against the trade, a formulation that might reflect some acquiescence in the current status quo—as might his allusion to "the duties" that must follow from the continuance of the planters' rights: namely, the moral duties of boycotting two West Indian commodities, sugar and its by-product rum, the one "useless," the other, "pernicious" (*LST*, 248). But the duties that result

from the continuation of the trade are not just the moral ones of abstinence. Duties are also economic, and it is likely that the pun served to remind his audience that the very high price of sugar reflected the import duties that formed such a large part of the Government's revenue. At the height of the boycotting campaign, Thomas Clarkson boasted that the Government's sugar revenue had fallen by £200,000 in the last quarter of the year 1791.⁷ There were also the unequal sugar duties that, by providing artificial protection to West Indian sugar, prevented free trade and more competitive pricing. Thus the high cost in moral terms was also a high economic cost to the consumer in the form of taxes, and it is perhaps not too far-fetched to see in Coleridge's pun on "duties" the economic challenge to the old protectionist, plantocratic economy that must always be seen to go hand in hand with the moral and humanitarian grounds for abolition.

Broadly speaking there is a gender to the items Coleridge singles out for boycotting. Sugar and its sweetness tend to be associated with women and that quintessentially feminine pastime, tea-drinking; rum, with men—in particular the British sailors, for whom rum was almost a munition of war.⁸ Sugar, the primary substance, interests Coleridge more than rum, partly because of its gender and partly because it was such a mobile signifier. Once the possession of a rich minority, an indicator of status and rank, by the end of the eighteenth century sugar was downwardly mobile, as was tea, the beverage it sweetened (the duties on tea were lifted in 1784). Nevertheless, despite the fall in prestige that accompanied the democratization of its consumption, sugar still retained something of its former status as a luxury item. It was, after all, a tropical import; it was also, as Coleridge argued, useless—a superfluity rather than a food, an additive rather than something sustaining, enjoyed in periods of leisure, such as the work break or, less innocently, enjoyed at the feminine, gossippy, trivial tea-table—diverting "the pains of Vacancy by the pestilent inventions of Luxury" (*LST*, 236). The association of women with brutal colonization and with the leisured consumption of luxury imports is, of course, well established by the end of the eighteenth century.⁹ Punning in another 1795 lecture on the connection between Britain's "commercial Intercourse" and death, Coleridge argues that the trade in the East Indies had cost 8 million lives—"in return for which most foul and heart-inslaving Guilt we receive gold, diamonds, silks, muslins & calicoes for fine Ladies and Prostitutes. Tea to make a pernicious Beverage, Porcelain to drink it from, and salt-petre for the making of gunpowder with which we may murder the poor Inhabitants who supply all these things."¹⁰

It is easy enough to show that Coleridge's imagination was haunted by the horrors of slavery. The diseased bodies that rot the ships' planks during the middle passage—a detail mentioned twice in this lecture—pass into *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: "I looked upon the rotting sea, / And drew my eyes away; / I looked upon the rotting deck, / And there the dead men lay."¹¹ At the same time, however, the contradictions embedded in his oppositional rhetoric give credence to the claim that the ideology of anti-slavery is closely allied to that of colonization and imperialism. Principally I would draw attention to the lecture's uneasy slide between identity and difference, between outraged sympathy and identification with the oppressed slaves, and uneasy notions of African otherness. The desire to naturalize and recuperate the other co-exists with a sharp sense of cultural difference as savagery; at the same time his text remains imprisoned within what Frantz Fanon has described as "manichean delirium," a pathological colonial relation whereby the world is radically divided into paired oppositions—white/black, good/evil, superior/inferior—in which the primary sign is the privileged one. Issues of gender and class raise the temperature of this delirium even higher. In the end, despite the axiom in morality promulgated in his lecture, "That Wickedness may be multiplied but cannot be divided and that the Guilt of all attaches to each one who is knowingly an accomplice," Coleridge the Unitarian ultimately deflects the blame for the trade away from himself and onto a variety of others: onto eucharistic worshippers, atheists and deists, novel-reading, tea-drinking ladies and, last but not least, the African victims themselves (*LST*, 247).¹²

As an instance of identification—idealized and nostalgic—take the following sentimental vignette, put forward by Coleridge's lecture in rebuttal of the argument that Africans were better off in the plantations than in their own native country:

The Africans, who are situated beyond the contagion of European vice—are innocent and happy—the peaceful inhabitants of a fertile soil, they cultivate their fields in common and reap the crop as the common property of all. Each family like the peasants in some parts of Europe, spins weaves, sews, hunts, fishes and makes basket fishing tackle & the implements of agriculture, and this variety of employment gives an acuteness of intellect to the negro which the mechanic whom the division of Labour condemns to one simple operation is precluded from attaining. (*LST*, 240)

The confrontation appears to be between two antagonistic modes of production—that of the self-subsisting, Pantisocratic Africans, unsullied

by commerce, and that of the metropolitan, capitalist center. Ironically, the text from which this vignette is taken is Carl Wadstrom's *Essay on Colonization* (1794).¹³ A Swedish abolitionist and naturalist who advertised himself as "a zealous friend to the Africans," Wadstrom devotes his hefty tome to elaborating upon his enthusiastic proposition that "the colonization of Africa is not only practicable, but, in a commercial view, highly prudent and adviseable" (*EC*, iii). Wadstrom may fulminate against the barbarities of the slave trade and the uprooting of Africans from their lives of agricultural innocence, but he does so because the horrors of the middle passage seemed so unnecessary; why not transform all of Africa into one happy plantation managed by Europeans for European advantage? It was "surely somewhat preposterous" Wadstrom argued,

to drag the Africans to the West Indies, there to drudge amidst whips and chains, in cultivating a commodity which, had they been prudently and humanely dealt with, they might have been induced to raise, as an article of commerce, upon their own soil, and that much nearer to the European markets than the nearest of the West Indian islands. (*EC*, 4)

The pastoral idyll excerpted by Coleridge reads very differently when read back into its context, for it actually forms part of Wadstrom's complaint that the Africans, laboring solely for their "natural necessities," currently "do every thing in a solitary, desultory manner." In order to establish a labor pool and rationalize production, all the white colonizer need do is to excite in the Africans "innocent artificial wants" and then organize them so that they labor "in concert" and upon a system. "Refined nations form systems, and rise to generals," he writes; "unpolished tribes dwell on detail, and trifle in particulars." The colonizers must acquaint the Africans "with the dexterity and dispatch arising from the division of labour, and with the numerous advantages of combined exertions systematically conducted" (*EC*, 14–16). With its chapters on exploration, natural history, and native customs, Wadstrom's text exemplifies perfectly that would-be harmless confluence of scientific and commercial interests, which Mary Louise Pratt has designated "anti-conquest": "The strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony."¹⁴ Small wonder that the West Indian planters and monopolists, with their exhausted estates, vigorously opposed "free" settlements like Sierra Leone, the West African colony inaugurated by British abolitionists in the mid 1780s. For Wadstrom,

however, who was a keen supporter of the Sierra Leone project, competition between the two systems was quite unnecessary; instead, he urged his fellow colonizers to teach the Africans

to avenge themselves on the blind and sordid men who purchase them, only by becoming more useful to them as free-men, than ever they have been, or can be, as slaves. Thus, on the wreck of tyranny, let us build altars to humanity, and prove to the negroes that the Europeans, become just from sound policy, and generous from a sense of their true interests, are at last disposed to make some atonement for the irreparable mischiefs their perverted system of commerce has occasioned in Africa. (*EC*, 23–24)

From the ashes of the slave trade rises the phoenix of systematic commercial colonization. Ignatius Sancho, an eighteenth century Anglo/African writer whose letters were published in England in 1782, was perfectly correct in saying of his times that “the Grand object of all Christian navigators is money—money—money.”¹⁵

The second instance of identification with the African is Coleridge’s Eurocentric conflation of the British slave merchants’ two quite different sets of victims—on the one hand, press-ganged British seamen, on the other, enslaved Africans. As in the preceding instance, he draws heavily on someone else’s text—this time, Thomas Clarkson’s *Essay on the Impolicy of the African Slave Trade* (1788), borrowed the day before from the Bristol Library, together with Wadstrom’s *Essay on Colonization*. In using Clarkson’s “Impolicy” essay, rather than his earlier *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1786), Coleridge reverses the order of Clarkson’s priorities, which had been to present the inhumanity of the trade first, then the more pragmatic considerations of its economic impolicy. There are two points I want to make here. The first is that Clarkson’s *Impolicy* essay fits well with Wadstrom, because Clarkson centers his *Impolicy* argument around the belief that it would be far preferable to colonize and commercialize Africa for commodities like sugar and cotton than to export enslaved Africans to the West Indies for the same purpose; to press the point home, Clarkson’s gifts of the *Impolicy* essay to Prime Minister Pitt and Louis XVI were accompanied by specimens of African native produce and manufactures.¹⁶ My second point is that, while it was important to reiterate the charge that Africa was a grave rather than a “nursery” for British seamen (as claimed by the pro-slavers), Coleridge goes so far as to detach the familiar narrative of enslavement from the enslaved, reserving it instead for the enslavers. Because the burden of his concern is for the evil effects of slavery upon

his countrymen rather than upon Africans, he narrates (via Clarkson), how the British sailors are captured through a method of false purchasing involving both trickery and force; they suffer savage punishments on the sea journey, the numerical losses are high, and in general, the means by which the trade is carried on is "so destructive and iniquitous as to brand with ignominy every nation that tolerates it" (*LST*, 239).¹⁷ Britain, here projected as a nation self-enslaved, self-branded, self-injured, seems to mirror the Africa of the pro-slavers, a country whose inhabitants were already enslaved before the advent of the European trade. It is even just possible that the entire Western system of "buying, selling and torturing human flesh" is encoded by Coleridge as a primitive art, practised to perfection in Africa and transmitted to the civilized world.

In support of that last point I want now to direct attention to the most conspicuous oppositional strategy of Coleridge's essay, which is to effect a reversal so that England is black not white, savage rather than civilized, superstitious rather than rational. While an Anglo-African contemporary of Coleridge's, the ex-slave Olaudah Equiano, was making this reversal real by describing in his autobiography his terrible fear that the white English sailors, with their "horrible looks, red faces, and long hair," were going to eat him, Coleridge's strategy is a rhetorical one, centering on his extended pun on cannibalism and the eucharistic rites, a conflation supposedly designed to dismantle the ideological basis of European colonialism and racism.¹⁸ To the Christian who calls down blessings on the food he is about to eat, Coleridge scoffs:

Gracious Heaven! . . . A part of that Food among most of you is sweetened with the Blood of the Murdered . . . O Blasphemy! Did God give Food mingled with Brothers blood! Will the Father of all men bless the Food of Cannibals—the food which is polluted with the blood of his own innocent Children? (*LST*, 248)

This type of lurid rhetoric was common enough in the many dissenting tracts urging readers to give up sugar. In the tenth edition of one such pamphlet, the author William Fox imaged sugar as a "loathsome poison," a host held to the lips but "steeped in the blood of our fellow creatures"; minute calculations were also performed: "In every pound of sugar used . . . we may be considered as consuming two ounces of human flesh."¹⁹ Since one of the problems with slavery was that it tended to be, for most British people, "out of sight, out of mind," abolitionists like Fox and Coleridge purposefully link the two worlds of black and white, the colony and the metropolis, the site of production and the site of consumption. In Coleridge's words, his aim is to convert "the produce into the things

producing, the occasioned into the things occasioning” by means of his truth-painting imagination (*LST*, 248). Seeking to destabilize the categories of white and black, the “civilized” and the “primitive,” so that, satirically, the European consumer becomes the “true” savage, Coleridge disavows otherness, but the disavowal tips over into violence. Instead of collapsing the opposition between Europe and Africa, the pun on cannibalism and eucharistic rites has the opposite effect of reinforcing the boundaries. The very introduction of the topic of cannibalism—that ultimate boundary marker between self and other—was a sure way of putting his listeners in mind of the chief arguments for justifying slavery—the unspeakable savagery of Africa and the Africans.

The blasphemous eucharistic feast is anticipated by a number of eating metaphors—no doubt intended as food for thought, what Coleridge sarcastically terms at the beginning of his talk, “intellectual aliment” (*LST*, 235). First there is the “seasoning” of the African slave, a two to three year period of acclimatization and “light” labor before the rigors of the cane-fields. Following the seasoning one could apply a range of European culinary practices, such as roasting alive (Coleridge cites one such incident [*LST*, 243]); or there was boiling, a “common punishment” according to the evidence presented by abolitionists before the House of Commons in 1790 and 1791.²⁰ As we can see in Gillray’s 1791 abolitionist cartoon, entitled “Barbarities in the West Indias” (Fig. 2), boiling literalizes the metaphor of sugar-eating Europeans ingesting African flesh and blood. The drowning African melts in the huge cauldron of boiling sugar juice; he or she passes invisibly but materially into the substance of refined white sugar, which then circulates around the tea-tables of the West. In this diabolic inversion of the Eucharist, the black African is a type of crucified Christ, the eating of whose body brings damnation rather than salvation. Blackness is consubstantial with whiteness.

Such a radical internalization of black within white might, however, suggest more than the violence of an inhuman labor system. It could also be argued that the huge sugar cauldron represents the melting pot of miscegenation, the threat of black men with white women, the reality of white men with slave women and the large mulatto populations to which this most common form of sexual exploitation gave rise.²¹ While interracial sex was firmly established as a way of life in the West Indies, mulatto populations undermined the logic of slavery by confusing the essential distinction between the races. Hence the West Indian obsession with racial purity, as can be seen in the development of an elaborate system of nomenclature for classifying colored offspring, with the Quinterones

Figure 2. James Gillray. "Barbarities in the West Indies" (London: H. Humphrey, 1791). By permission of the British Museum.

indistinguishable, in the end, from whites. There was also a growing fear of large mulatto populations, and the slave rebellions they might precipitate; the bloodshed and anarchy of Santo Domingo, for instance, was widely construed as the result of tension between the colonial *grands blancs* and the free *gens de couleur*, or free coloreds. In the light of these last two points, then, the melting pot of miscegenation might also embody the white supremacist's fantasy of assimilation leading to racial extinction, the stain of blackness removed by repeated incest, a process tried and proved in the West Indies and commonly known as "washing a man's self white" through several generations of daughters.²² To many, though, the hoped-for invisibility of blackness through racial amalgamation offered little comfort; the stain of racial pollution would always be ineradicable, always likely to re-surface, like the return and revenge of the repressed, in the coal-black baby.

Fanon, in analyzing the structure of white negrophobia, argued that "it is in his corporeality that the Negro is attacked . . . the Negro is only biological . . . [he] symbolises the biological."²³ The same might also be said of woman; in fact, recent feminist analyses, such as that of Marianna Torgovnick, establish convincingly the sort of circularity that exists (and has always existed) between concepts such as the "female" and the "primitive."²⁴ Somewhat ironically, then, from the first settlement of the British West Indies, we see feminist writers opening out their anti-slavery analogies from the seraglios of the east to the sugar plantations of the west, a new direction that only intensifies throughout the eighteenth century, culminating in a lively debate about the links between the oppression of black Africans and women's legal and domestic subordination (especially within marriage, under the common law doctrine of coverture).²⁵

It is possible that the scapegoating of the white Lady at the end of Coleridge's lecture represents a reaction to the fillip given to feminism by abolitionist rhetoric. Setting the white woman in opposition rather than alongside her black African counterpart, Coleridge sneers:

Sensibility indeed we have to spare—what novel-reading Lady does not over flow with it to the great annoyance of her Friends and Family—Her own sorrows like the Princes of Hell in Milton's Pandemonium sit enthroned bulky and vast—while the miseries of our fellow creatures dwindle into pigmy forms, and are crowded, an unnumbered multitude, into some dark corner of the Heart where the eye of sensibility gleams faintly on them at long Intervals— (*LST*, 249)

Of course I say “in opposition” (the white woman is a “savage” to the African), but it will be obvious that Coleridge is also identifying the landscape of Africa and its inhabitants (the “pigmy forms”) with the body of this atavistic woman, particularly with the fathomless depths of her heart of darkness—a nice anticipation, this, of Freud’s description of adult female sexuality as the “dark continent” of psychology.²⁶ Voraciously carnal, in her violence and savagery Coleridge’s English woman *is* Africa and all Africans. Her heart is the grave of Africa, and her consumption a consummation, a pun on eating and sexuality anticipated by Coleridge in his earlier desire for the “consummation” of abolition, now that “nine millions of Slaves have been consumed by the Europeans” (*LST*, 246). This conflation of femininity and negritude, of sexual license and violent cruelty, anticipates later medical and scientific research on the pathology of the sexualized female. Once we place Coleridge’s white woman within a racialized category, we have no trouble recognizing her for what she really is beneath her civilized exterior; the dark corner of her heart is the black hidden within, the primitive whose unbridled sexuality is allied to degeneracy and madness.²⁷ She is the prototype of Charlotte Brontë’s white Creole heiress, Bertha Mason, the suspicion of whose impure race becomes absurdly visible in the “blackened inflation” of her “savage face,” her “pigmy intellect” and “giant propensities.”²⁸

Although Coleridge’s editors cite the work of his friend Benjamin Flower, *The French Constitution* (1792), as the source for his novel-reading Lady (*LST*, 248–49n), an equally strong case could be made for the following passage from Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790):

Where is the dignity, the infallibility of sensibility, in the fair ladies, whom, if the voice of rumour is to be credited, the captive negroes curse in all the agony of bodily pain, for the unheard of tortures they invent? It is probable that some of them, after the sight of a flagellation, compose their ruffled spirits and exercise their tender feelings by the perusal of the last imported novel.²⁹

The source of the rumor was the evidence currently being heard before the House of Commons, some of which detailed highly sensational stories of the cruelties of planters’ wives and daughters. While the purpose of this evidence was designed to show how even “those most disposed to benevolence and compassion” could be corrupted by the iniquity of slavery, Wollstonecraft’s purpose in citing this material is twofold and quite specific; she is concerned to overturn Burke’s influen-

tial gendering of aesthetic categories in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), and also to respond to certain hysterical features of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).³⁰ The two aims, in fact, are linked: the attack on the rigidity of Burke's gender distinctions licenses Wollstonecraft to play gleefully upon his deepest fears about how these distinctions might become vulnerable to revolutionary violations. These fears surface most conspicuously in the spectacle he paints of those "furies of hell," the "ferocious" fish-women who forced the royal family back to Paris in October, 1789. Instead of the triumph of a civilized martial nation, the march resembled nothing more than "a procession of American savages."³¹ Nor were Burke's fears about women confined to those of the lower orders; even the queen herself, the focus of so much of his sentimental and flowery rhetoric, when once stripped of the "pleasing illusions" and "decent drapery of life," descends to an animal, "And an animal not of the highest order."³²

While the point of Wollstonecraft's passage is anti-Burke rather than anti-slavery, it nevertheless strengthens the association I mentioned earlier between the brutality of slavery and colonization, and the degenerate, depraved, devouring woman. Another instance of this association can be seen in Mrs Barbauld's verse *Epistle to William Wilberforce*. No doubt mindful, like Wollstonecraft, of the horrific case against women unravelling before Parliament, she writes:

Lo! where reclined, pale Beauty courts the breeze,
Diffused on sofas of voluptuous ease;
With anxious awe her menial train around
Catch her faint whispers of half-uttered sound;
See her, in monstrous fellowship, unite
At once the Scythian and the Sybarite!
Blending repugnant vices, misallied,
Which frugal nature purposed to divide;
See her, with indolence to fierceness joined,
Of body delicate, infirm of mind,
With languid tones imperious mandates urge;
With arm recumbent wield the household scourge;
And with unruffled mien, and placid sounds,
Contriving torture, and inflicting wounds.³³

According to Hannah More, herself the author of a poem addressed to Wilberforce, no passage in Barbauld's epistle pleased the leading parliamentary abolitionist more than this description of the "union of barbarity

and voluptuousness in the West Indian woman.”³⁴ Seen in this context, the prominence of the sofa in *Mansfield Park*, upon which the languid and indolent Lady Bertram lolls with her pug, is no accident but a reminder to the reader of the somewhat tainted source of Sir Thomas’s wealth, the slave trade that underpins his English “plantations” at Mansfield Park.³⁵

If Lady Bertram is a kind of hybrid, an English woman with some features of the West Indian plantation-owner’s wife, the English woman proper forms the subject of one of Hannah More’s numerous interventions in the slavery debate, a rather grotesque jeu d’esprit entitled *The White Slave Trade. Hints towards framing a Bill for the Abolition of the White Female Slave Trade, in the cities of London and Westminster* (1792). In this prose tract More asks those working for West Indian abolition to consider “the abolition of slavery at *home*—a slavery the more interesting,” she argues, in that it may be found to involve “the wives, daughters, nieces, aunts, cousins, mothers, and grandmothers even of these very zealous abolitionists themselves.”³⁶ This slavery is personified by Fashion, a tyrant presented by More as crueller than any West Indian slave-driver. Jokily modeling her feminist case on the two abolitionist grounds of the inhumanity and impolicy of the trade, More’s target is the marriage market with its “coming out” season(ing) and sale of sweet fair English flesh.³⁷ Arguing that the young English woman is a greater sufferer than the African, More likens her obligatory appearance in overcrowded rooms to the cramming of slaves in ship-holds; worse still, the young debutante’s enforced absence from the safety of family life is compared to one of the most brutal features of slavery: the forcible separation of African families upon captivity or at auction. Although in jest, More’s thoroughgoing application of every aspect of her analogy strikes us as obscene; and of course the joke has its all too serious counterpart in the protest writings of other contemporary women. Mary Ann Radcliffe, for instance, rebuked the abolitionists for callously putting the cause of illiterate slaves before that of their own countrywomen. In a short pamphlet pleading for greater employment opportunities for middle-class women, Radcliffe appeals to her white male audience in the name of racial solidarity: “What are the untutored, wild imaginations of a slave, when put in the balance with the distressing sensations of a British female, who has received a refined, if not a classical, education, and is capable of the finest feelings the human heart is susceptible of?”³⁸ The same point is made, albeit with more delicacy, in Jane Austen’s *Emma*. While for propriety’s sake Jane Fairfax denies

making any strict equation between the moral enormity of the slave-trade and “governess-trade,” her bitter conjunction of the two (“the sale—not quite of human flesh—but of human intellect”) leads her to insinuate that of the two sets of victims, it is the governesses who bear the “greater misery.”³⁹

Flower’s *French Constitution*, which, as I have already mentioned, is cited by Coleridge’s editors as the source of his vision of feminine barbarity, brings into collision the two worlds of the white English and the West Indian woman. Mindful of the evidence before the House, and keen to publicize two recently published abolitionist tracts, Flower indulges himself in the rhetoric of feminine sensibility that Wollstonecraft so deplored:

I wish to recommend these tracts more particularly to the attention of those whose influence and example in society can effect any thing they please—I mean *THE LADIES*. They are formed to feel, more than the men are; and if there ever was a subject which ought in a peculiar manner to call forth their feelings, it must be that of the Slave Trade. When they read the abstract of the evidence repeatedly laid before the public—When they attend to the conduct of some of the West Indian Ladies towards their slaves—With what horror and anguish must they behold a system which divests the sex of their peculiar glory, their amiableness, their sensibility; a system which transforms the loveliest part of God’s creation into savages and brutes! Let them, if they can, when reflecting on this subject, continue morning and evening, to sweeten their tea, and the tea of their families and visitors, with the blood of their fellow creatures: but should they continue such a practice, they must not be surprised, if some persons should presume to think, that the pretensions of the present age to exalted sentiments, refined feelings, and exquisite sensibility, are little more than pretensions; and that pure sterling excellence and goodness are not so often found in real life, as in the imagination of the poet and novelist.⁴⁰

Beneath the chivalry—the standard appeal to woman as a creature of superior moral refinement—we see emerging those inexplicable and irrational connections between female sexuality, race, and versions of the primitive. To the extent that Flower’s woman drinks blood, “a diet only fit for savages,” she is, like Bertha Mason, both cannibal and vampire.⁴¹ She needs the abolitionist tracts more than her male counterpart because ultimately she is the real savage. She becomes what she eats, one of those “savages and brutes,” then dangerously serves up to others the food she

has polluted, disguised as sweetness. When reading the tales of the inhuman cruelty of the planters' wives and daughters, the English woman is advised to look into the mirror of her own barbarity.

Every passage alluding to the evidence before the House of Commons effaces what a reading of that evidence makes quite clear. White woman's cruelty was not random and indiscriminate; for the most part it was aimed at women slaves, for sexual reasons, such as "*being found pregnant*," or "*for jealousy*."⁴² John Stedman, a British mercenary to the West Indies, noting in 1790 the white men's preference for African rather than creole women, remarked that it was small wonder "the poor ill treated Ladies should be Jealous of their Spouses and so bitterly take revenge on the cause of their disgrace—the negro and Mulatto Girls whom they persecute with the greatest bitterness and most barbarous tyranny."⁴³ So what the English woman sees when she reads these tales of female ferocity is no general spectacle of depravity but the terrible image of the workings of patriarchal right, in particular as this is manifested in the holding of property in women, what Robert Wedderburn denounced as "this dreadful species of female *property*."⁴⁴ The slave-master husband who has right of sexual access to his wife also has right of sexual access to his slaves; thus it comes about that oppressed white women victimize their even more oppressed women slaves.

The sexual and racial oppression that we see in the evidence before the House of Commons—white master with black woman slave—is not, however, as close to the surface of Flower's passage as that most taboo form of interracial sex: white woman with black man. In drinking the African's blood, the white English woman not only becomes black in a moral sense; the mingling of black and white blood is clearly a metaphor for sexual intercourse. Here the violence of slavery as a labor system merges with the gothic horror of slavery as a sexual system. Under slavery, the torture and murder of blacks stains with sin the blood of the national community, but with emancipation the purity and integrity of English blood seems suddenly at risk of sexual pollution. As soon as public opinion appeared to be turning against the trade from the 1770s onwards, pro-slavery writers moved quickly to play upon the spectre of a Britain overrun with freed black men. To an absurd degree, the fears associated with mulatto populations in the West Indies began, in some quarters, to be matched by fears about the impact of abolition on race relations in Britain. Edward Long, planter, polemicist, and chief caricaturist of black sexuality, provides us with the best known statement of its kind. In his *Candid Reflections* (1772) we read:

The lower class of women in England are remarkably fond of the blacks; for reasons too brutal to mention they would connect themselves with horses and asses if the laws permitted them. By these ladies they [the blacks] generally have a numerous brood. Thus, in the course of a few generations more, the English blood will become . . . contaminated with this mixture . . . this alloy may spread so extensively as even to reach the middle, and then the higher orders of the people, till the whole nation resembles the *Portuguese* and *Moriscos* in complexion of skin and baseness of mind. This is a venomous and dangerous ulcer, that threatens to disperse its malignancy far and wide, until every family catches infection from it.⁴⁵

Thirteen years later James Tobin, plantation owner and father of one of Wordsworth and Coleridge's close Bristol friends, echoed Long's dire predictions, warning that "great numbers of negroes at present in England, the strange partiality shewn for them by the lower orders of women, and the rapid increase of a dark and contaminated breed, are evils which have long been complained of and call every day more loudly for enquiry and redress." Once again we see the convergence of woman and blackness, the mythical sexual promiscuity of black man finding a fitting mate in the lower ranks of the so-called higher species, with the result that "in almost every village are to be seen a little race of mulattoes, mischievous as monkeys and infinitely more dangerous."⁴⁶ So thin was the line between the black African and the degraded white female that, in the same year Flower published his *French Constitution*, Clara Reeve was arguing that, with abolition, the Africans "will flock hither from all parts, mix with the *natives*, and spoil the breed of the common people," producing "a vile mongrel race of people, such as no friend to Britain can ever wish to inhabit it."⁴⁷

Whereas slavery formalized relations between blacks and whites, emancipation would clearly have the opposite effect, making the question of maintaining the rigid boundaries of race all the more urgent and important. The spectre of an England overrun with blacks and mulattoes, the slow but sure extinction of the white race: these fears were not held exclusively by planters and other pro-slavers. Abolitionists were also alarmed by the growing black population, especially when the end of the American War of Independence brought many ex-slaves to London, swelling the numbers of black poor already living in ghettos. The disastrous Sierra Leone scheme, drawn up by leading abolitionists like Granville Sharp and Clarkson in the mid to late 1780s, was clearly designed to rid London of its surplus blacks. Although masquerading as

a relief effort, the scheme was nothing more than enforced transportation; and there seems no doubt that fear of interracial sex was one of the prime motives. Jonas Hanway, philanthropist, abolitionist, and chief mover of the new settlement, was known for his intense dislike of “unnatural connections between black persons and white; the disagreeable consequences of which make their appearance but too frequently in our streets.”⁴⁸ At exactly the same time in America, in 1787, Thomas Jefferson was arguing the necessity of both emancipation and removal; once freed, the black “is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture.” To those who argued for assimilation, he listed the following objections: “Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made.”⁴⁹ And first in order of importance amongst those “real distinctions” is color: the physical inferiority of the negro, and his inevitable desire to join himself to the “superior beauty” of white woman. For Jefferson such a preference was as predictable as “the preference of the Oran-ootan for the black women over those of his own species.” Equality for the black male, in so far as that meant equal access with white men to white women, led Jefferson to fear social anarchy, even “the extermination of the one or the other race.”⁵⁰

Ten years after his lecture on the slave trade, Coleridge noted in his diary a curious fact related to him by a traveler from the West Indies: that when it came to whipping, “the Negroes often console themselves in their cruel punishments, that their wounds will become *white*.” In spite of their abhorrence of the cruelty of white men, they look on this whitening “as a grand Progression in their rank of Nature.” The longing to be free is perceived as a longing to transgress the boundary of color, a transcending of self through disfigurement, pain and abjection. Coleridge’s note continues:

Their Love of *white*, their belief that superior Beings are white, even in the inmost parts of Africa where they have seen no White men/ it is a color beloved by their good Deities & by the Supreme of all, the Immense, to whom they do not pray, but whose existence they confess. This among so many others in favor of permanent Principles of Beauty as distinguishable from Association or the Agreeable/⁵¹

The conviction of an ordered ranking and hierarchy in nature is similar to that held by Jefferson, as is the application of neoclassical notions of beauty to underpin the racist fantasy of an inevitable gravitation of black towards white, black longing to enter and be merged with white. The

belief in a common humanity, the sentimental identification of the African as brother: these recuperative features of abolitionism always co-exist with a panicky and contradictory need to preserve essential boundaries and distinctions. Thus it comes about that the miscegenation that makes a mockery of the "real distinctions" underpinning slavery assumes grotesque proportions within the context of emancipation. At the level of white fantasy, abolition would appear to usher in a shocking reversal—one that involves freed black men with white women rather than white masters with black slaves. Accepting the black man as an equal and as a brother, as the Wedgwood seal invites us to do, is essential for ending the violent blood-letting of slavery; the fear remains, however, of the perilous intimacies abolition will bring, the fear of a blood disseminated.

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NOTES

¹ Catherine Hall, in a recently published collection of her essays, asks: "How did the respectable middle-class orthodoxy of emancipation, the conviction that blacks were men and brothers, women and sisters, become the new racism of the late 1860s, confident in its assumption that blacks were a different species, born to be mastered?" *White, Male and Middle-Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 26.

² Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent," *"Race," Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), 189, 185, 217.

³ Catharine Stimpson, "'Thy Neighbor's Wife, Thy Neighbor's Servants': Women's Liberation and Black Civil Rights," *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, ed. V. Gornick and B. Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 455.

⁴ bell hooks, "Racism and Feminism," *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 144.

⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Lecture on the Slave Trade," in *Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion*, ed. L. Patton and P. Mann (Princeton: Routledge and Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), 235–51. Hereafter, cited parenthetically in the text and abbreviated *LST*.

⁶ Playing upon the literal interpretation of the abolitionists' slogan, Robert Wedderburn, the mulatto preacher and insurrectionist, publicly taunted his white half-brother with the words "BROTHER OR NO BROTHER—THAT IS THE QUESTION?"; see *The Horrors of Slavery and other Writings by Robert Wedderburn*, ed. Iain McCalman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1991), 51, 55.

⁷ See the *Correspondence of Josiah Wedgwood 1781–1794* (London: The Women's Printing Society, 1906), 186.

⁸ For the importance of rum as a West Indian commodity, see Richard Pares's story of the Pinneys of Bristol, *A West-India Fortune* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1950), 193.

⁹ Two recent articles dealing with this subject are Laura Mandell, "Bawds and

Merchants: Engendering Capitalist Desires," *ELH* 59 (1992): 107–23, and Laura Brown, "Reading Race and Gender: Jonathan Swift," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23 (1990): 425–43.

¹⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Lectures on Revealed Religion," in *Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion* (note 5), 226.

¹¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), 54.

¹² The same claim of shared guilt is made in the much reprinted tract of William Fox, *An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Propriety of Abstaining from West India Sugar and Rum*, 10th ed. with additions (1792; Philadelphia: Daniel Lawrence, 1792), 8–9.

¹³ C. B. Wadstrom, *An Essay on Colonization, particularly applied to the Western Coast of Africa, with some free thoughts on Cultivation and Commerce; also Brief Descriptions of the colonies already formed, or attempted, in Africa, including those of Sierra Leona and Bulama* (London: Darton and Harvey, 1794). Hereafter, cited parenthetically in the text and abbreviated *EC*.

¹⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 7.

¹⁵ Quoted from Keith A. Sandiford, *Measuring the Moment: Strategies of Protest in Eighteenth-Century Afro-English Writing* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna Univ. Press, 1988), 90.

¹⁶ See E. L. Griggs, *Thomas Clarkson: The Friend of Slaves* (1936; reprint, Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1970), 45, 53.

¹⁷ For an influential, much quoted account of the brutal treatment of English sailors, see Alexander Falconbridge, late surgeon in the African Trade, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (London: J. Phillips, 1788).

¹⁸ See *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa The African. Written by Himself* (1789; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 44. White man's cannibalism seems to have been a common fear; Robert Wedderburn's poem, "The Africans Complaint on board a Slave Ship," contains the following lines: "Here de white man beat de black man, / 'Till he's sick and cannot stand, / Sure de black be eat by white man, / Will not go to white man's land" ([note 6], 95).

¹⁹ Fox (note 12), 4, 5.

²⁰ See *An Abstract of the Evidence delivered before a Select Committee of the House of Commons in the years 1790, and 1791; on the part of the Petitioners for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade* (London: James Phillips, 1791), 72.

²¹ The recently edited diaries of the Jamaican slaveholder Thomas Thistlewood give a chillingly graphic account of such exploitation; see *In Miserable Slavery. Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750–86*, ed. D. Hall (London: Macmillan, 1989).

²² For an instance of this, see the anonymous novel *Adventures of Jonathan Corncob, Loyal American Refugee. Written by himself* (1787; reprint, Boston: Godine Publishers, 1976), 73.

²³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin: White Masks*, trans. C. L. Markmann (1952; London: Pluto Press, 1986), 163–67.

²⁴ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1990).

²⁵ See Vivien Jones, ed., *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 154, 210.

²⁶ This notorious reference is to be found in his 1926 essay, "The Question of Lay

Analysis," *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Anna Freud, trans. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), 32.

²⁷ See Sander L. Gilman's essay, "The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality," in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), 76–108.

²⁸ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847; rpt., Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), 286, 310.

²⁹ *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. J. Todd and M. Butler, 7 vols. (London: William Pickering, 1989), 5:45.

³⁰ The evidence heard before the House is found in *An Abstract* (note 20), 73n.

³¹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 165, 159.

³² Burke (note 31), 171.

³³ *The Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld. With a Memoir by Lucy Aikin*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1825), 1:176–77.

³⁴ See Betsy Rodgers, *Georgian Chronicle: Mrs Barbauld and her Family* (London: Methuen, 1958), 112.

³⁵ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, in *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1923), 3:190, 432. For a reading of Fanny as a slave sent to her uncle's English "plantations" see Yasmine Gooneratne's article in *Sensibilities: The Jane Austen Society of Australia* (Sydney: The Jane Austen Society, 1992), 2–16; also, Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 106–7.

³⁶ *The Works of Hannah More*, 11 vols. (London: T. Cadell, 1830), 3:385.

³⁷ Similarly, in *Mansfield Park* (note 35), Austen's reference to the "trade of coming out" for young women is yet another of that novel's many slavery allusions (3:267).

³⁸ Mary Ann Radcliffe, *The Female Advocate Or an Attempt to Recover the Rights of Women from Male Usurpation* (1792) (1799; reprint, New York: Garland Publishing, 1974), 469.

³⁹ Jane Austen, *Emma*, in *The Novels of Jane Austen* (note 35), 4:300–301. For another uneasy conjunction of feminism and anti-abolitionism, see Anna Maria Falconbridge's *Narrative of Two Voyages to the River Sierra Leone* (1802; reprint, London: Frank Cass, 1967) and Pratt's (note 14) discussion of Falconbridge (102–7).

⁴⁰ Benjamin Flower, *The French Constitution*, 2nd ed. (London: G. G. J. & J. Robinson, 1792), 452–53.

⁴¹ See Catharine Macaulay, *Letters on Education, with Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (1790; reprint, New York: Garland Publishing, 1974), 39.

⁴² *An Abstract* (note 20), 76.

⁴³ John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, ed. R. and S. Price (1790; reprint, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988), 49.

⁴⁴ See Wedderburn (note 6), 55.

⁴⁵ Quoted from Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 157–58.

⁴⁶ Quoted from Fryer (note 45), 161–62. Olaudah Equiano wrote a brilliant letter in reply to Tobin, published in *The Public Advertiser*, 28 January 1788. Dismissing "the mixture of colour" as of "no consequence," he goes on to attribute to this warped prohibition on interracial marriage the hideous oppression of black women by white planters; the letter has been reprinted in *Black Writers in Britain, 1760–1890*, ed. P. Edwards and D. Dabydeen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1991), 74–77.

⁴⁷ Clara Reeve, *Plans of Education, with Remarks on the Systems of Other Writers. In a Series of Letters between Mrs. Darnford and her Friends* (1792; reprint, New York: Garland Publishing, 1974), 90–91; emphasis added.

⁴⁸ Quoted from Fryer (note 45), 196.

⁴⁹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. W. Peden (1787; reprint, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1982), 143, 138.

⁵⁰ Jefferson (note 49), 138.

⁵¹ *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 4 vols., ed K. Coburn (London: Routledge, 1957–), 2:2604.

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