

The Rhetoric of Sensibility: Argument, Sentiment, and Slavery in the Late Eighteenth Century.

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*The Rhetoric of Sensibility:
Argument, Sentiment, and
Slavery in the Late Eighteenth
Century*

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that by adapting the style and techniques of sentimental novels, poetry, and drama to persuasive writing a significant number of late-eighteenth century political writers were able to develop a distinct and recognisable rhetoric of sensibility. It develops this argument by examining eighteenth-century views on the use and purpose of rhetoric, and by looking at writing in one of the most wide-ranging debates of the late-eighteenth century, the debate over abolition of the slave trade. Chapter One looks at traditional ('neo-classical') rhetoric and contrasts this with some of the many varieties of the eighteenth-century 'new rhetoric'. Chapter Two looks at particular rhetorical strategies employed during the sentimental period and identifies the main tropes of the rhetoric of sensibility. Chapter Three examines the relationship between slavery and literary sentimentalism, looking at the way in which imaginative writers used sentimental rhetoric to advance the idea of anti-slavery. It also considers the extent to which abolitionist poems, plays, and novels themselves contributed to the development of a sentimental rhetoric. Chapter Four examines the use of sentimental rhetoric in non-fictional slavery-related tracts and pamphlets. It explores the ways in which the sentimental rhetorical strategies outlined in Chapter Two were adopted by both pro and anti-slavery writers of the 1780s. Chapter Five discusses how William Wilberforce, the main parliamentary advocate for abolition, used sentimental rhetoric in his early parliamentary speeches. The conclusion examines anti-slavery writing after the collapse of the first abolition campaign in 1792. In particular, it examines the use of sentimental rhetoric in responses to the revolutions in France and Haiti and suggests that after this date sentimental rhetoric, though never entirely disappearing, was progressively supplanted by other forms of rhetoric.

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Abbreviations

DNB	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
ESTC	<i>English Short-Title Catalogue</i>
HCJ	<i>Journal of the House of Commons</i>
HLJ	<i>Journal of the House of Lords</i>
OED2	<i>Oxford English Dictionary, Revised Edition</i>

Introduction

Towards the end of *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, a satirical novel written in 1800 by Elizabeth Hamilton, Bridgetina Botherim is rehearsing a plan to woo the man she loves. Bridgetina, the principal character of the novel, believes herself to be a philosopher and thinking that 'now she should have the glory of arguing him into love', she looks over 'a speech which had long been conned, twice written over in a fair hand, and thirteen times repeated in private'. To aid the delivery of this spontaneous effusion of her affection she has 'for the help of memory, in case of interruption, a sort of index taken of the contents'. This index includes the following:

*Moral sensibility, thinking sensibility, importunate sensibility; mental sensation, pernicious state of protracted and uncertain feeling; congenial sympathy, congenial sentiment, congenial ardour; delicious emotions, melancholy emotions, frenzied emotions; tender feeling, energetic feeling, sublimised feeling; the germ, the bud, and the full-grown fruits of general utility, &c. &c.*¹

The plan fails and so she decides to post the speech to her beloved, fantasising that their correspondence will be published under the title *The Sweet Sensations of Sensibility, or the Force of Argument*. Bridgetina believes that she can argue the object of her desire 'into love', that is, by playing on a sentimental theme she can force him to experience emotions which he did not previously possess. The index is thus a form of rhetoric, indeed, it is a prescription for a course of sentimental rhetoric describing a dozen or so sentimental tropes and arguments.

¹ Elizabeth Hamilton, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, 3 vols (Bath: R. Cruttwell, 1800), III, p. 102.

In his 1990 essay 'Sensibility as Argument' Stephen Cox calls this index 'cant, jargon, [and] self-important verbiage'.² The novel is a satirical one and cant, jargon, and self-importance are being exposed as fashion and folly. But this appears to be a special case. 'Plainly', argues Cox, 'the rhetoric of sensibility has been around long enough to weary any normal audience'. Cox is right to note that before a discourse can become amenable to such sweeping satire it must first be familiar. Indeed it was. By the year 1800 sixty years worth of sentimental novels, plays, and poems had been produced to which were added political and philosophical writings which either promoted or referred to theories of sensibility. In this context Hamilton was able to clearly distinguish and ridicule a number of rhetorical strategies which characterised the rhetoric of sensibility and distinguished it from any other rhetorical system. Cox observes Hamilton's identification of these strategies, calling them 'formulas', but does not proffer any further analysis of how they might work—or even ask if the formulas satirised by Hamilton bore any relationship to actual strategies used by sentimental persuaders.

This dissertation argues that during the middle to late eighteenth century a distinct and recognisable sentimental rhetoric became available for use by writers and public speakers. It suggests that this rhetoric is a mode of persuasive language, popular from the middle to the late eighteenth century, in which a number of loosely connected rhetorical tropes and arguments became available for the rhetorician to choose from when attempting to persuade an audience that a person, or group of people, are suffering and that that suffering should be diminished or relieved entirely. Central to this rhetoric is a belief in the power of sympathy to raise awareness of suffering, to change an audience's view of that suffering, and to direct their opposition to it. As we shall see, sentimental rhetoric was closely associated with the largely literary movement now known as 'the new rhetoric', but was not entirely dependent on it. To a very large extent it operated without theory, depending on its practitioners to take an emotional and often anti-intellectual stance to their discourse. It is this atheoretical quality to the rhetoric of

² Stephen Cox, 'Sensibility as Argument', in Syndy Conger, ed., *Sensibility in Transformation: Creative Resistance to Sentiment from the Augustans to the Romantics* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), 63-82, p. 76.

sensibility which, perhaps, accounts for the difficulty experienced by many observers in locating it or even recognising its existence.

The failure to identify the rhetoric of sensibility is not particularly surprising since sensibility as a literary phenomenon was itself scarcely considered worthy of critical attention until comparatively recently. Many twentieth-century critics are fond of talking about the way in which eighteenth-century writers degenerated into sentimentality. For many critics, especially those of the modernist period, 'sensibility', and more especially its near-synonym 'sentiment', became pejorative terms denoting a trite and probably feigned emotionality. For these critics the idea that there could be such a thing as a sentimental rhetoric might seem rather ludicrous, contradictory even. Sentimental writing seems to suggest an emotional and anti-logical approach to the world while rhetoric is one of the noble disciplines of both the ancient and the modern world, closely allied to the study of logic. To the eighteenth-century observer the idea may not have seemed so unlikely. 'Sentiment' was not a pejorative term, nor were human feelings seen as being largely below the dignity of philosophers and rhetoricians. Rather than degenerating into sentimentality, many late-eighteenth-century writers aspired to sentimentality, recognising an opportunity to tap directly into the heart of the human condition. If sentimental literature could put people in touch with their emotions, as many in the eighteenth century believed, it was clearly a powerful persuasive tool.

This dissertation will consider what exactly characterised the rhetoric of sensibility, how it differed from other rhetorical systems (if, indeed, it was a complete system in its own right) and how it operated to influence the views of those who read it. We shall also be considering how such a rhetoric came into being and some of the arguments which it was used to support. The existence and operation of this rhetoric will be demonstrated largely through a discussion of the debate over slavery and abolition, a major political debate of the last phase of the 'age of sensibility'. Other debates of the period concerned themselves with subjects such as the war with America, repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, the king's

illness in 1789, and a host of social questions ranging from duelling to prostitution. After 1789 the implications of the French Revolution became more important to contemporary observers even than slavery and abolition but, as we shall see in the conclusion to this dissertation, this event coincided with a distinct change in the use of the rhetoric of sensibility. Meanwhile, the abolitionists demanded a fundamental change to the way Britain did business with the world and at the same time asked searching questions about the British character and the British constitution. Virtually no aspect of British culture, economy, religion, and society went unexamined by those who argued either for or against abolition of the slave trade and few people were not touched, even superficially, by the debate.

A second reason for choosing the abolition debate is that the subject of the debate automatically predisposes it towards being discussed in terms of feeling. Colonial slavery was never benign and from the start involved particularly brutal forms of violent coercion which routinely involved torture, rape and murder. Any discussion of slavery had either to ignore these facts or to expose and react to them. Descriptions of human suffering necessarily require the narrator to address the feelings of the people undergoing the suffering, at least on a physical level. In these accounts it is difficult for the narrator not to speculate on emotional suffering as well. Likewise, it is difficult for most narrators to distance themselves from their account and so accounts of suffering normally demonstrate at some level the narrator's feelings about the scenes being described. This is not to say that descriptions of suffering are automatically sentimental. However, in an era such as the late eighteenth century in which much popular discourse was conducted in the language of sentiment we find that much of the discourse of suffering is indeed advanced through the rhetoric of sensibility.

Finally, but by no means of the least consequence, was the realisation that the discourse of slavery and abolition merited investigation in its own right. As well as being the most important political question of its time, the debate over slavery ranks as one of the most important issues ever addressed by the British people. Countless millions of people were affected by the trade and the consequences of

British slavery remain with us to this day. The African Diaspora, a continuing denial of the legacy of slavery, and a deep-rooted racism in British society remind us that the debate over—and the consequences of—slavery and abolition are far from over.

The eighteenth-century slavery debate influenced almost every area of cultural production and because of this the texts selected for examination in this dissertation are drawn from a broad and sometimes eclectic field. Poems, plays and novels are examined alongside political essays, tracts and pamphlets. Newspaper reports and accounts of political speeches are given consideration as well as selections from a small number of diaries, journals and letters. Their quality or contemporary popularity has not been used as the primary reason for selection although in many cases the quotations reproduced, though now largely forgotten, would have been familiar to most well-informed readers of the period. Because modern readers cannot be expected to have the same level of familiarity, biographical and historical material has been included in several places. Biographical material, however, is only included where the person involved is a major figure in the dissertation or where the biography of that person is not widely known.

Throughout the dissertation the material selected is examined in the light of one or more of three primary approaches. The first such approach is the historical one. Texts are located historically and interpreted with the help of any relevant historical knowledge which can be brought to bear on our understanding of the text. The second approach is one of critical analysis. Techniques of close reading are applied to produce commentary and analysis of the texts under consideration. The third approach is the rhetorical one. Here the material is viewed according to its usefulness as persuasive writing and according to the extent to which it exemplifies both classical rhetorical forms and the forms of the rhetoric of sensibility. Since all of these approaches depend to a large extent on an understanding of the historical and critical background to both the discourses of

sensibility and slavery, it is intended here to look in more detail at both of these topics.

Sensibility

The words ‘sensibility’, ‘sentimental’ and ‘sentimentalism’ have always enjoyed a close relationship. Some critics, such as G.J. Barker-Benfield and Chris Jones, insist that they are ‘cognate’ or even more or less ‘interchangeable’.³ Others, including Janet Todd and Jerome McGann, argue that the terms are very different. McGann goes as far as to say that the habit of considering the terms interchangeable is ‘symptomatic of a wholly inadequate critical procedure’.⁴ He does not supply a usable alternative critical procedure, however, while continuing to use the words interchangeably throughout his own book.⁵ Todd’s teasing apart of the words is more convincing but she too fails to sustain throughout the body of her writing the careful distinctions made in her introduction. Sensibility, in so far as it is amenable to such simplifications, was a discourse which celebrated the passions over the intellect, which valued the untutored response over the considered reply, and which favoured ‘natural genius’ to philosophical and critical procedures. As such it was—and remains—difficult to define precisely. Samuel Johnson thought that ‘sensibility’ described ‘quickness of sensation’ and ‘quickness of perception’. A person with sensibility would be quick both to understand an event and to experience the appropriate feelings. ‘Sentiment’ was a more difficult concept. Johnson recognised that it could mean ‘thought; notion; opinion’, but he also considered it to be ‘the sense considered distinctly from the language or things’: our sensory experience of things rather than the things themselves. Finally,

³ G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. xvii; Chris Jones, *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 5.

⁴ Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: a Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p. 96n; Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 6-9.

⁵ His unusable distinction is that ‘sensibility emphasizes the mind in the body, sentimentality the body in the mind’, *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Johnson noted that sentiment was by 1755 already a term of literary criticism. One usage, he stated, was that it was ‘a striking sentence in a composition’.⁶

Johnson’s definitions, written during the early period of sensibility, do not fully anticipate the importance the words were to assume in the following forty years. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, ‘sensibility in its C18 uses ranged from a use much like that of modern *awareness* (not only *consciousness* but *conscience*) to a strong form of what the word appears literally to mean, the ability to feel’.⁷ It was therefore available for use in an extraordinarily wide variety of situations ranging from the intimate to the public and, as Williams suggests, the overtly political. ‘Sentiment’ too became a powerful term, meaning, in Williams’s words, ‘a conscious openness to feelings, and also a conscious consumption of feelings’, the latter use, he argues, leaving ‘sentimental’ vulnerable. Williams’s argument is useful one, although it ignores the usage in Johnsonian literary criticism, as well as failing to draw a strong distinction between ‘the ability to feel’ and ‘a conscious openness to feelings’. Bearing these shortcomings in mind, Williams’s definitions guide the usage of these words in this dissertation. However, some care has to be taken with ‘sentiment’, ‘sentimental’, and ‘sentimentality’. Williams notes that from the early nineteenth century these words were increasingly used in a pejorative sense ‘against people who feel “too much” as well as against those who “indulge their emotions”’.

The discourse of sensibility could in part be identified by its diction. The Finnish etymologist Eric Erämetsä has identified 147 words supposedly characteristic of sensibility.⁸ Some, like ‘pity’, ‘merit’, and ‘esteem’, for example, have merely a contextual relationship with sentimentalism. Verbs such as ‘weep’, ‘sigh’, and ‘melt’ are more central and were used liberally by sentimental writers to establish the sentimental tone. Amongst the words identified by Erämetsä are some which

⁶ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols (London: W. Strahan *et al.*, 1755).

⁷ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976), pp. 236-237.

⁸ Eric Erämetsä, *A Study of the Word “Sentimental” and of Other Linguistic Characteristics of the Eighteenth-Century Sentimentalism in England*, *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae*, Series 13, No. 74 (Helsinki: Helsingin Liike Kinjapaino Oy, 1951), *passim*.

are central to this dissertation. First is a group of words including ‘feeling’, ‘sensation’, and ‘emotion’. These tend to move discussion away from principles of reason and intellectualism and towards the more irrational sentimental principles which they describe. One important point to note is that these become extremely positive words, especially in stock phrases such as ‘a man of feeling’. The next important word, though not considered by Erämetsä, is ‘sympathy’. As we shall see throughout Part One of this dissertation this was a key term in the philosophy of sentimentalism and one which encapsulated a number of theories about human sociability. The ability to ‘feel with’ another is itself a possible definition of ‘sensibility’, a point recognised by Johnson who defined ‘sympathy’ as ‘mutual sensibility’.⁹ In political terms recognition of the sympathetic impulse was vital to the formation of campaigns and policies which aimed to relieve the suffering of others. Arising in part from this ‘active sensibility’ were a group of words which were used to describe the relationship of the sentimental person with the larger world. These included ‘benevolence’, ‘humanity’, ‘charity’, and ‘philanthropy’. In poetic discourse they were often personified but always they were held up as models of behaviour to be emulated by those with sensibility. While ‘humanity’ was used in the eighteenth century (and much earlier) to describe the ‘disposition to treat human beings and animals with consideration and compassion, and to relieve their distresses’ the words ‘humanitarian’ and ‘humanitarianism’, which today would encompass so much of eighteenth-century ‘active sensibility’, did not appear to become widespread until the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰ Finally, eighteenth-century writers drew an important distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false sensibility’, a distinction which was made almost entirely on the single criterion of sincerity. True sensibility was natural and unfeigned. False sensibility was affected and rehearsed.

The change in attitude to the words ‘sentiment’ and ‘sensibility’ is part of the story of the critical reception of the literature of sensibility. This can be divided into three distinct phases. In the first phase critics, often sentimental writers

⁹ His entire definition of ‘sympathy’ ran: ‘fellowfeeling [sic]; mutual sensibility; the quality of being affected by the affection of another.’

¹⁰ OED2

themselves, discussed the work of their contemporaries in terms which were frequently highly sentimentalised or closely and personally involved with the debate. Thus Oliver Goldsmith, writing in *The Westminster Magazine* in 1773, argues that 'those abilities that can hammer out a Novel, are fully sufficient for the production of a Sentimental Comedy'. Like many, Goldsmith saw the novel as an inferior species of writing and sentimental drama likely to remain popular if only because 'it is, of all others, the most easily written'.¹¹ Goldsmith's apparent self-effacement (he was a writer of sentimental verse, drama and novels) may have been tactical, but the view expressed here was shared by many. At the very least Goldsmith's essay shows that from the start sentimental literature met with a mixed reception, even from those who produced it.¹² The second long phase involved a reaction against sentimentalism which originated in the late eighteenth century, was consolidated in the mid-nineteenth century, and which reached an advanced state of precision with the modernist movement of the early-twentieth century. Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen are the most famous early critics of sensibility, but their interventions were light skirmishes compared to the later onslaught. Victorian critics typified by George Meredith, argued E.M. Forster, made 'heavy attacks on sentimentality'. The modernist generation, he continued, pursued 'the same quarry but with neater instruments'.¹³ Literary history in this phase was constructed so as to view the literature of the post-Augustan period as merely transitional. The perceived sentimental opposition to reason led many to view sensibility as a 'Romantic precursor' rather than as a discourse in its own right. The third (and current) phase is the revisionist one. Post-war critics such as Northrop Frye have sought to rehabilitate 'the age of sensibility' into the canon while historicist and new-historicist critics have begun to argue that the discourse of sensibility should not be judged according to current notions of taste but rather studied as an historically located cultural phenomenon. The intention here is to

¹¹ Oliver Goldsmith, 'An Essay on the Theatre; or, A Comparison between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy' (1773), ed. Arthur Friedman, *The Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), III, pp. 209-213.

¹² For a clear introduction to this early phase see John Mullan, 'Sensibility and Literary Criticism', *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, 8 vols, ed. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), IV, pp. 419-33.

¹³ E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 89.

follow, in chronological sequence, the main developments in the twentieth-century critical debate over sensibility.

The modernist view of sentimentalism can be illustrated by reference to two of the most influential texts of twentieth-century criticism. I.A. Richards's *Practical Criticism* is in many ways the manifesto for the 'new criticism'. Richards includes a chapter on the subject of 'Sentimentality and Inhibition' in which he argues that 'among the politer terms of abuse there are few so effective as "sentimental".' To explain why, he defines three senses in which the word 'sentiment' can be used. A person is sentimental, he argues, when their feelings are too easily stirred, when their feelings are 'crude' rather than 'refined', or when the emotional response to a situation is 'inappropriate to the situation that calls it forth'.¹⁴ This judgement appears not to be an attempt at defining an aspect of eighteenth-century culture, but rather a statement of early-twentieth-century literary taste. T.S. Eliot, the most celebrated critic to discuss sensibility in this period, has little to say about the eighteenth century. His notion of the 'dissociation of sensibility' maintains that in the seventeenth century 'thought' and 'feeling' became separated. The problem was that 'while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude. The feeling, the sensibility, expressed in the *Country Churchyard* (to say nothing of Tennyson and Browning) is cruder than that in the *Coy Mistress*.'¹⁵ The problem was reversed, he argues, with the advent of the modernist poets. This analysis risks dismissing almost all the poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At best it views the poetry of this period as transitional. This notion is not confined to the work of Eliot. Those few early twentieth-century critics and literary historians who have examined sentimental literature broadly agree with both Eliot and Richards. J.M.S. Tompkins is compelled to start her 1932 study with the self-conscious admission that 'a book devoted to the display of tenth-rate fiction stands in need of justification.'¹⁶ Walter Francis Wright, in 1937, is sure of his ground

¹⁴ I.A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: a Study of Literary Judgement* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1929), p. 255.

¹⁵ T.S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921) in *Selected Essays 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932), pp. 241-250, p. 247.

¹⁶ J.M.S. Tompkins, *The Popular Novel in England, 1770-1800* (London: Constable, 1932), p. vii.

when he argues that 'the general theory that the novel between Richardson and Scott was transitional, that it became more and more romantic, will be opposed probably by no one.'¹⁷ Wright certainly does not oppose this theory, nor does James R. Foster, the title of whose 1949 *History of the Pre-Romantic Novel in England* is revealing.¹⁸

Critical analysis of sensibility had thus reached a nadir by the end of the 1940s. Rehabilitation commenced in the 1950s with the publication of Northrop Frye's short essay: 'Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility'. 'The term "pre-romantic"', Frye argues, 'has the peculiar demerit of committing us to an anachronism before we start, and imposing a false teleology on everything we study'.¹⁹ Instead, Frye introduces the term 'age of sensibility' which has the useful attribute that it defines sensibility in its own terms rather than in relation to other earlier or later discourses. Sentimental authors, in Frye's analysis, are typically 'process-writers' so that 'when we turn to *Tristram Shandy* we not only read the book but watch the author at work writing it'.²⁰ In Frye's view this applies to Richardson as well as Sterne and sentimental poetry is no different. When reading this 'our ears are assaulted by unpredictable assonances, alliterations, inter-rhymings and echolalia [...]. The reason for these intensified sound patterns is, once again, an interest in the poetic process as distinct from the product.'²¹

Frye's analysis was clearly intended to be indicative rather than definitive. Ian Watt's acclaimed study, *The Rise of the Novel*, produced a few years later, was more self-consciously proposing a general theory of literature (or at least the novel) for the mid-eighteenth century. Watt's notion of the novel as a prose narrative displaying 'formal realism' has become one of the orthodoxies of literary studies. His discussion of sensibility, however, is slight and despite including

¹⁷ Walter Francis Wright, *Sensibility in English Prose fiction, 1760-1814: a Reinterpretation*, Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, XXII, 3-4 (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1937), p. 149.

¹⁸ James R. Foster, *History of the Pre-Romantic Novel in England*, The Modern Language Association of America Monograph Series, 17 (London: Oxford University Press, 1949).

¹⁹ Northrop Frye, 'Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility', *ELH*, 23, 2 (June 1956), 144-52.

²⁰ Frye, p. 145.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp 146-7.

Richardson in his trinity of early novelists he has little to say on the subject. 'There are undoubtedly features in Richardson's works', he argues, 'which are "sentimental" [...] but the term is nevertheless misleading when applied either to his own outlook or to the characteristic literary quality of his novels.' Richardson is not truly a sentimentalist, he implies, because:

He presented a much wider range of feelings than those to which the sentimentalists proper usually restricted themselves. What is distinctive about Richardson's novels is not the kind or even the amount of emotion, but rather the authenticity of its presentation.²²

Although ostensibly about Richardson this short passage has more to say about the sentimental novel in general. It concurs with the prevailing belief of the mid-twentieth century that sentimentalism involved a narrow and counterfeit emotionality. Watt dismisses the sentimental novel for these reasons while claiming Richardson for the mainstream realist novel. As an exercise in canon-making it was successful. Critics, intrigued by Watt's broader analysis, tended to share his interest in the 'big' realist novelists of the century; Defoe, Fielding, and Richardson, with Smollett and occasionally Sterne added to the list. However, Sterne's obvious deviations from formal realism were problematic to the Watt school. Even more problematic were the dozens of other sentimental novelists, later joined by the Gothic novelists, who disrupted the supposedly smooth progression of the realist novel.

The tendency to see this group, which includes Sterne, Scott, Mackenzie, and Radcliffe, as an interruption to the rise of the realist novel was challenged by Leo Braudy in a short essay written early in the 1970s in which he argues that 'Sterne, among others, is not upending but extending the essential self-definition of the novel in England'.²³ The fragmentary form of *Tristram Shandy* and *The Sentimental Journey*, and the 'discovered manuscripts' of *The Man of Feeling* and

²² Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), p. 174.

²³ Leo Braudy, 'The Form of the Sentimental Novel', *Novel*, 7 (1973), Fall, 5-13, p. 5.

The Castle of Otranto are framing narratives which ‘can liberate an author from necessary adherence to established forms to experiment with the form that arises from the story itself.’²⁴ The fragmentary form is a way of masking the premeditated literary quality of the sentimental novel and giving voice to the inarticulate (meaning both the non-literate or merely ‘quiet’ subject and the deep emotions which are incapable of being written). In this sense ‘the anti-literary pose of the sentimental novel is neither naïve nor hypocritical [...] It is an essential part of the attack the novel in general makes in the name of private experience’.²⁵ Braudy’s influential essay thus views the form’s main strength as its ability to represent immediate private emotional experience rather than considered and polished intellectual thought. Of perhaps greater importance to the study of sensibility as a whole, though, is his insistence that the sentimental novel was central and not peripheral to the development of the ‘serious’ novel. This simple assertion has directed many future studies of sentimental literature.

R.F. Brissenden’s *Virtue in Distress* considerably enlarged the scope of the debate. Brissenden’s argument is based upon an investigation into a simple question. He notes that the word ‘sentimental’, in the twentieth century, has particularly ‘derogatory connotations’ but that the modernist judgement of sentimentalism fails to ask ‘why sentimental ideas, ideals and attitudes should have seemed at all admirable to anyone at the time’.²⁶ In answering this question he notes that ‘the key word is “sensible”: what we know derives ultimately from what our *senses* tell us—from our *sensibility*’.²⁷ Sensibility was admirable because it was an offshoot of empirical philosophy. This requires some qualification and he notes that:

The assumption that the source of all knowledge and value is the individual human experience is not, of course, peculiar to sentimentalism, but it is essential to it. What distinguishes it in its sentimental aspect is the way in which it was used to stress certain features of that experience [...] The role

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁶ R.F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

of the feelings, especially in the formation of moral judgements, was particularly emphasised.²⁸

He concludes that the peculiar attraction of sentimentalism in the eighteenth century lay in its apparent ability to resolve the Enlightenment question of whether reason or feeling were paramount. Sentimentalism effectively fudged the issue by allowing 'sentiments' to come to mean 'reasonable feelings', a development which greatly extended the usefulness of the genre 'to explore human problems in a new and illuminating manner'.²⁹ Brissenden was also the first modern critic of sentimentalism to note its political and social dimension, although his discussion of sentimentalism and the French Revolution seems inadequate in the light of more recent studies.

Brissenden notes in a number of places that sentimentalism, founded on sensual experience, was always susceptible to a sexual interpretation. This view is explored in considerable depth by Jean H. Hagstrum in *Sex and Sensibility*, which appeared in 1980. It is a broad study, commencing with discussion of Milton and Dryden and concluding with analysis of Goethe and Austen, dabbling along the way in music and painting. On this wide canvas he places sentimentalism much earlier than is usual, going as far as to relegate Sterne to 'the aftermath' of sensibility. This limits the usefulness of the book for those specifically interested in middle and late-eighteenth-century sentimental literature, but does not devalue its general thesis. Essentially, Hagstrum conducts an analysis of the culture and literature of love and sex with the intention of qualifying (and enriching) the celebrated historical analysis provided in 1977 by Lawrence Stone in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England*.³⁰ He accepts Stone's thesis that the long eighteenth century saw the development of new forms of affective behaviour which culminated in the development of the nuclear family, and argues that much of the

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

³⁰ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1977).

culture of the period 'reflects precisely the conditions Stone has so amply and ingeniously displayed'.³¹

In one sense Hagstrum appears to be making the rather simplistic argument that the conflation of sex and sensibility in the eighteenth century was a transitional phenomenon in the development of modern notions of romantic love. In this respect his argument belongs more properly with earlier studies of sensibility which define the period as one of 'pre-romanticism'. However, his discussion does reach more deeply than this, especially in its account of the changing representations of women (viewed via Milton's Eve) and the family. Hagstrum's detailed reading of the sentimental conflation of reason and feeling concludes with the conflict between wit and feeling in Choderlos de Laclos's novel *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1782). In this battle wit ultimately loses 'while sentiment goes to its grave in spiritual triumph'. Hagstrum concludes that 'feeling, guided by value and capable of achieving love is both more basic and more permanent. Perhaps we can now say with some confidence that the deepest if not the most attractive legacy of the Age of Reason is the *coeur sensible*.'³² This feeling heart is so central to his thesis because it operates in two modes: that of *eros* or erotic love and *philia* or 'brotherly' love. While the former is emotional and personal, the latter is rational and political, and Hagstrum provides a useful model of how these two existed in a mutually reinforcing relationship.

By 1986, the year in which Janet Todd produced *Sensibility: An Introduction*, there clearly existed a growing critical debate on the role of sensibility in eighteenth-century literature and culture. Todd's contribution to this was not so much an analytical but a facilitative one. Her study was the first (and still the best known) introduction to the subject aimed at students and general readers. Throughout she offers clear and brief readings of the literature but her brevity often leads her into over-simplification. This is most evident in the final chapter where her assertion that the realities of French Revolutionary politics sounded the

³¹ Jean H. Hagstrum, *Sex and Sensibility: Ideal and Erotic Love from Milton to Mozart* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 2.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 277.

death-knell for sensibility glosses a complex interaction between culture and politics. By arguing, for example, that ‘the major English radical writers were severely rational [and] saw sensibility as dangerous and self-indulgent’ she fails to note that many of those who apparently attacked sensibility were engaged in a more subtle dialogue with sensibility.³³ Indeed, some of the main radical writers, including Mary Wollstonecraft and John Thelwall, wrote sentimental novels themselves, despite Wollstonecraft’s famous attack on sensibility in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).³⁴

Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* views the rise of the novel as a site for the working out of new gender and social relationships and argues that the literary construction of the ‘domestic woman’ was a decisive move in the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. Her central argument is that:

Narratives which seemed to be concerned solely with matters of courtship and marriage in fact seized the authority to say what was female, and that they did so in order to contest the reigning notion of kinship relations that attached most power and privilege to certain family lines.³⁵

Armstrong’s contention that ‘the formation of the modern political state—in England at least—was accomplished largely through cultural hegemony’ is a large claim indeed and one which is by no means proved by her study.³⁶ What is demonstrated is that there was indeed some sort of relationship between new constructions of femininity and the rise of both the novel and the bourgeoisie, but whether those were determining relationships or merely coincidental ones remains

³³ Todd, *Sensibility*, p. 131.

³⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft wrote two novels: *Mary, A Fiction* (1788) and *The Wrongs of Women: or, Maria* (1798) both, with the *Vindication*, in eds Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, *The Complete Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 7 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1989). John Thelwall wrote several sentimental novels and poems but especially *The Peripatetic; or, Sketches of the Heart, of Nature and Society; in a Series of Politico-Sentimental Journals, in Verse and Prose, of the Eccentric Excursions of Sylvanus Theophrastus; Supposed to be Written by Himself*, 3 vols (London: John Thelwall, 1793), which frames radical political thought in a narrative clearly based on Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey*.

³⁵ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

unclear. More significantly, the work discusses the growth in the eighteenth-century market for conduct literature. These, Armstrong observes, were hardly new in this period although they assumed a rather new character in that they prescribed the attributes which were to come to be seen as specifically feminine. By the end of the century, she argues, 'conduct books had settled on one kind of fiction as truly safe for young women to read', namely, the sentimental novel.³⁷ In her study of *Pamela*, she argues that Richardson 'contained the strategies of the most deleterious fiction—a tale of seduction—within the framework of a conduct book.'³⁸ The analysis is strained at times but Armstrong does establish a relationship between conduct literature and the early novel which has proved fruitful for later critics.

Published in the same year was John Dwyer's *Virtuous Discourse* which covers some of the same ground but confines its attention to eighteenth-century Scotland. Dwyer is concerned with moral thought in the Scottish Enlightenment and this leads him into an examination of sensibility as discourse. He argues that Scottish thinkers were 'among the first moralists anywhere to propagandize the novel as a respectable literary form and, especially, as an effective mechanism for the molding of sensitive youth'. In this respect his argument complements Armstrong's discussion of conduct literature, particularly where he talks about 'the new view of women as the catalysts and managers of sensibility within the protected haven of the domestic and private sphere.'³⁹ In Dwyer's analysis, sensibility is always proactive, political, and moralistic. Sympathy is a key concept in this discourse while the novels of Henry Mackenzie and the moral works of Adam Smith are key texts. Indeed they were, but Scottish writers and Scottish ideas were not isolated in the eighteenth century. English and European writers and thinkers played an equally large part in the 'conversation' which Dwyer describes. By focusing only on Scotland Dwyer's work is necessarily a narrow one.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

³⁹ John Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1987), p. 6.

John Mullan's *Sentiment and Sociability* considers a broader group of both Scottish and English literary and philosophical writers. In particular he examines a model of sociability typified by the relationship between the lives and works of Hume, Richardson, and Sterne for whom he shows in turn that 'sociability depends upon the traffic not only of opinions, but of harmoniously organized feelings.'⁴⁰ The social models represented in their works (which each lived out to some extent) were offered in such a way as to both flatter and guide the reader, each of whom was positioned 'as the exceptional connoisseur of commendable sympathies'. Indeed, 'the very form of the novel in the eighteenth century implied a contract,' Mullan argues, 'by the terms of which a reader was set apart from the anti-social vices or insensitivities which the novels were able to represent.'⁴¹ The implications of this relationship between the sentimental novel and the 'exceptional reader' are considerable. Not only does sentimental literature propose models of sociability and correct behaviour but it also persuades the reader to adopt those lifestyles by appealing to the reader's personal emotional experience. In other words, the sentimental novel makes use of an overtly political sentimental rhetoric.

Mullan's main thesis is not concerned with the details of this rhetoric but rather with the seeming paradox created by the conflict between the needs of the exceptional reader and the social reader. He explores the ways in which theories of sympathy, especially Hume's, could be used to explain the existence of human society by proposing the ability to sympathise as the essential social attribute of human nature. In an influential discussion of Richardson's novels he shows how feminine sociability is constructed as a sympathetic ability, supposedly possessed by all women, to read the language of one another's bodies: 'women are bound together—in Richardson's extraordinary version of femininity—in sighs, in tears, in postures and movements instantly understood.'⁴² But this vision of female community is not matched in the novels of Mackenzie and Sterne where the

⁴⁰ John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: the Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 113. Terry Eagleton, in a Marxist reading, goes on to describe this physical sensibility as 'the first stirrings of a primitive materialism—of the body's long inarticulate rebellion against the tyranny of the theoretical.' Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 13.

individual response—and the individual obsession—threaten to destabilise the idea of sociability. Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* 'does not even really celebrate a type of social being, but falls back on the invented voice of one dedicated to a specialized and eccentric experience of society.'⁴³ In the end excessive sensibility and too strong a desire to withdraw from a harsh and unfeeling world lead to hysteria and hypochondria. Thus a discourse marked initially for its sociability becomes one destructive to society. Mullan reads eighteenth-century sensibility as a narrative of decline from a rigorous intellectual position in the work of Hume to a threateningly anti-social (or at least self-indulgent) position in the work of Sterne and the later sentimentalists. However, Mullan considerably refines and strengthens the argument, made imperfectly by a number of critics before him, that sensibility was firmly grounded in philosophical theories of sympathy, particularly those of Hume and Smith, and was instrumental in redefining notions of society and sociability in eighteenth-century Britain.

G. J. Barker-Benfield's *The Culture of Sensibility* (1992) approaches sensibility largely from a gender perspective. Barker-Benfield starts by identifying yet another paradox which is that 'while sensibility rested on essentially materialist assumptions, proponents [...] came to invest it with spiritual and moral values'.⁴⁴ Barker-Benfield argues that these values (the 'culture' of his title) were largely feminine ones formed in the extensive reworking of female manners which took place in the eighteenth century and which can be described as 'sensibility'. Sensibility was not only the site and the expression of this reworking but was also a socially active force in that it sought to direct male as well as female behaviour. The culture of sensibility, he argues, was that culture by which 'middle-class women publicized their consciousness of segregation' from the male world and sought to endow the male, or public, sphere with supposedly feminine characteristics.⁴⁵ While sentimental literature was in the vanguard of this movement Barker-Benfield sees sensibility as a much more general social phenomenon, and to prove his theory he provides evidence from many other

⁴³ Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, p. 200.

⁴⁴ Barker-Benfield, p. xvii.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

spheres than the merely literary. In particular he examines eighteenth-century psychological theory and the growth of consumer society (with a great deal of exploration of popular consumer goods). His assumption that there were fundamental changes in gender relations in the eighteenth century is problematic, however, in that he chooses to explain this simply in terms of sensibility. In this account Barker-Benfield appears to be using the phrase ‘the culture of sensibility’ as a convenient catch-all to describe much of the wider culture of the eighteenth century.

Many critics have argued that sensibility came under attack and largely disappeared in the years immediately following the French Revolution. This thesis is examined in detail in Chris Jones’s *Radical Sensibility* (1993). Jones argues that the reason for this decline in the popularity of sensibility ‘was not predominantly aesthetic but political, social, and moral’.⁴⁶ He notes that sensibility was never homogenous but appeared in a number of varieties. On the one hand sensibility posited a natural benevolence in which society was held together by individuals working in mutual sympathy. On the other hand ‘it was also a social construction which translated prevailing power-based relationships into loyalties upheld by “natural” feelings’.⁴⁷ In the 1790s, as events in Revolutionary France unfolded, these versions of sensibility provided a site of conflict between radicalism and conservatism. Jones follows the radical rather than the conservative strand of 1790s sensibility, showing how the idea of universal benevolence, derived from the moral sense philosophers, guided writers of radical sensibility. He provides detailed and convincing readings of Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, and William Wordsworth to show that these writers, more often associated with Romanticism, were also steeped in the radical tradition of sensibility, a tradition which derived ultimately from the political arguments of eighteenth-century moral philosophers.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Jones, *Radical Sensibility*, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁸ Also exploring the 1790s and combining a political with a gender history approach is Claudia L. Johnson, *Equivocal Bodies: Politics, Gender and Sentimentality in the 1790s*, Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

In *The Politics of Sensibility* (1996) Markman Ellis examines ‘the paradox of sentimentalism’ which he argues arises because sentimental novels are ‘the site of considerable political debate [both] despite and because of the extraordinary texture of the novels’.⁴⁹ Ellis examines this paradox in relation to three political debates; those over the emergence of anti-slavery and slavery-reform opinion, the economics of canal building, and the relief of penitent prostitutes. It is in the first of these discussions that Ellis adds to our understanding of the political engagement of sensibility by demonstrating that sentimental novels (and to an extent poems) were an early site for the dissemination of anti-slavery (or at least ameliorationist) sentiment. Many of Ellis’s arguments are examined in detail in Chapter Three of this dissertation, but it is worth noting here that his general view that the loose and experimental form of the sentimental novel made it an ideal site for the working out of previously unexplored political questions is one which silently informs much of this dissertation.

Most critical literature on sensibility is engaged with the novel, and to a large extent with the ‘rise of the novel’ debate. *The Poetics of Sensibility*, Jerome McGann’s work of 1996, differs in that it is concerned with the much under-read poetry of sensibility. McGann notes that the critical habits of ‘institutional modernism’ have made it impossible for the modern (and, indeed, the postmodern) reader to engage with sentimental poetry on the emotional terms which it originally demanded. There is a modern tendency, he argues,

to approach all art, canonical or non-canonical, in rational—in theoretical and philosophical—terms. Theory and method are essential to criticism, but they must be secondary frames of reference: tools picked up to help clarify (for readers) less mediated perceptual encounters (affect at all levels).⁵⁰

McGann considers it necessary to rediscover the affective power of poetry, and for this reason reading the poetry of sensibility, in which affects are highlighted and the

⁴⁹ Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 4.

⁵⁰ McGann, p. 5.

process of reading emphasised, becomes almost a critical duty. McGann fulfils his duty assiduously, providing responsive readings of a large quantity of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century poetry, much of it requiring considerable recovery from critical obscurity. These readings, emphasising intuition and emotion, are often insightful. More often they are eccentric. McGann's desire to break away from the rationalist critical habits of the modern world and his concomitant rejection of much of the preceding critical studies of sensibility lead his work into a blind alley.

The most recent addition to the field considered here (it appeared in 1999) is Gillian Skinner's *Sensibility and Economics in the Novel*. This study starts from the premise that 'sensibility is linked inescapably to the economic', especially when distress is relieved by the wealthy disbursing alms.⁵¹ The economic aspect of the sentimental novel, Skinner argues, has long been overlooked 'in large part because the genre has always been seen as essentially feminine.'⁵² This has led critics into the error of thinking that, because feminised, sensibility could not be worldly. Skinner shows that sentimental fiction proposed a model of 'domestic economy' (a model backed up by conduct literature) in which frugality within the household allowed for benevolence to be directed to the needy in the outside world. For those already familiar with sentimental literature this argument may seem to be self-evident. However, Skinner shows that by taking benevolence and domestic economy as a starting point 'the sentimental novel was able to take part in contemporary debates on economic policy, forms of government, revolutionary politics and, infusing all these, definitions of femininity.'⁵³ It is this largely successful attempt to show a connection between the usually separated male and female economic worlds which is the real strength of Skinner's book.

This dissertation is allied with those studies which view sensibility as a politically engaged discourse heavily influenced by the moral sense philosophers. But these

⁵¹ Gillian Skinner, *Sensibility and Economics in the Novel, 1740-1800: the Price of a Tear* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

works have been uniformly inadequate in one important respect. Though recognising that sensibility was politically engaged they neglect to consider that the politician's first duty is to persuade. The existence of a politics of sensibility necessitates the existence of a rhetoric of sensibility.

Slavery and Abolition

This dissertation demonstrates the operation of the rhetoric of sensibility in the British debate over abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. The intention here, therefore, is to historically locate the anti-slavery material which is discussed, to expand upon the history of slavery and abolition, to account for at least some of its considerable historiography, and to take note of some of the critical positions and theories which have derived ultimately from the experiences of slavery, empire, and colonialism.

Slavery has a long history.⁵⁴ There were slaves in the Greek and Roman empires and in the late medieval period slavery was an accepted fact in many societies, both in Africa and in Europe. From the fourteenth century onwards crops like cotton and—especially—sugar had been grown by slaves, first in the Mediterranean, next on islands off the coast of Africa, and finally in the New World. The Portuguese first imported slaves from Africa in the mid-fifteenth century. With the discovery of the New World this activity was stepped up, with slaves being taken directly from Africa to South America and the Caribbean, and throughout the sixteenth century the Spanish, French, and Dutch gradually became involved as well. Both the association of sugar with slavery and the African slave trade were therefore well established by the early seventeenth century when British involvement in both

⁵⁴ Useful recent overviews of slavery, the slave trade and abolition, on which the following narrative is based, include: Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984); Edward Reynolds, *Stand the Storm: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (London: Allison and Busby, 1985); Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988); James Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (London: HarperCollins, 1992); Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440-1870* (London: Picador, 1997) and many essays in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, ed. W.R. Louis, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998-1999).

the sugar and the slave trades increased to a significant level. By the end of the seventeenth century Britain had become the predominant trading nation in slaves. State monopolies granted under Charles II were not long-lived, and by the early years of the eighteenth century the slave trade was effectively thrown open to all with the required capital. There was enough free capital in the British economy to ensure that plenty of people took advantage of this and a good deal of private money was invested both in the slave trade, and in the sugar plantations which the trade supplied. This was not without good reason. Estimates of the profitability of both trades vary considerably, but most historians are agreed that returns on investment were extraordinarily high, at least during the early to mid-eighteenth century. Those with the available capital invested where the returns were highest. By the end of the eighteenth century most of Britain's wealthiest derived some part of their wealth from slavery.⁵⁵

Estimates of the numbers of people taken into slavery during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries vary widely, but all historians agree that the trade took place on a vast scale. One of the most reliable statistical analyses of the trade, made by Philip Curtin in 1969, estimates that approximately nine and half million slaves were landed in the New World from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ Curtin also calculates that mortality on board slave ships ran at sixteen per cent, meaning that another one and a half million people died in the middle passage. He notes that no statistics can be compiled concerning those who died while being marched across Africa, but these numbers may have been considerable.⁵⁷ Initially, slaves were procured from coastal regions, but as time went on African slave traders were forced to obtain slaves from further inland. Many of the slaves were forced to walk for immense distances before reaching the coast. What followed was the middle passage from Africa to the New World. Olaudah Equiano, a

⁵⁵ The early history of slavery is detailed with particular clarity by Robin Blackburn in *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London: Verso, 1997).

⁵⁶ Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), p. 268.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

former slave, remembered the hold of a slave-ship well and he recounted how, a few hours after having been put below:

The air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died [...] This deplorable situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now became insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered it a scene of horror almost inconceivable.⁵⁸

Not surprisingly, the mortality rate on the middle passage was appalling, both amongst the slaves and the seamen. Disease, at least, proved the common humanity of Africans and Europeans, a point denied by the majority of slave traders, who treated the slaves worse than they would animals. Severe floggings, rape, and murder were routine on board ship, the discipline harsh because slave captains dreaded an onboard rebellion. More common were suicides and attempted suicides as slaves protested in the only way they could—or reached the point of despair. Those slaves who did arrive in the New World were put up for sale and ‘seasoned’: set to tasks like weeding and tending livestock. If they survived this the majority would be put into the fields and the back-breaking work would begin. Not all slaves were put to work in the fields, however. Sugar was normally processed on the island in which it had been grown and some slaves were skilled in sugar refining. Others developed all the skills required to keep the plantation and its population fed, clothed, and equipped. Yet another group worked as domestic slaves; cooking, cleaning, and dressing the plantation owners. Whether in the field or not, almost all slaves were at the mercy of the overseer and his whip. Violence was endemic, punishments for even the smallest ‘offences’ severe, and for rebellious slaves tortures of the most horrific sort were reserved.

⁵⁸ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 58.

But for all this, as James Walvin has pointed out, ‘the most effective discipline of all was the grinding routine of work itself.’⁵⁹

For as long as Britain had traded in slaves there had been those who registered their disquiet over slavery, some of whom published their views in sermons, tracts and pamphlets. Throughout the seventeenth and for most of the eighteenth centuries theirs were minority voices whose criticisms rarely reached a wide audience. Most, such as the Quaker George Fox, failed to criticise the institution itself but merely its more pernicious aspects. Fox urged more humane treatment for slaves, even advising manumission ‘after a considerable Term of Years, if they have served [...] faithfully’. He stressed too that this should be an honourable retirement rather than a laying off: ‘when they go,’ he wrote, ‘and are made free, *let them not go away empty-handed*’.⁶⁰ Nowhere does Fox explicitly condemn the institution of chattel slavery and in this he was not alone, a point made by Robin Blackburn who argues that he was:

outraged by the inhumanity of the plantations without yet seeing beyond slavery, a mixture that was echoed in some private letters or journals, in isolated acts of kindness and in the precarious tolerance sometimes extended to small numbers of black freedmen and women.⁶¹

This low-key and largely private benevolent response to slavery is characteristic of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. However, as British involvement in slavery grew, greater numbers of British people came into contact with both slaves and the products of slave labour, and the number of those expressing disquiet grew in proportion. David Brion Davis has pointed out that by the early eighteenth century the substance of the anti-slavery debate had to a large extent been worked out, even if few people were aware of it. In his analysis of two anonymous essays published by the American Quaker John Hepburn in 1715 he

⁵⁹ Walvin, p. 238.

⁶⁰ George Fox, *Gospel Family-Order, being a short discourse concerning the Ordering of Families, both of Whites, Blacks and Indians* (London, n.pr., 1676), p. 16.

⁶¹ Blackburn, *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, p. 43.

notes that 'taken together, these remarkable essays answered virtually every pro-slavery argument that would appear during the next century and a half.'⁶² They went largely unread, even in the colony in which they were written. In England, while literary discussions of slavery became increasingly common in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, political tracts on the subject emerged only in 1769 when Granville Sharp produced *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery*.⁶³ The essay was an important one, not least because it made available for the first time in a dedicated work many of the arguments against slavery which were circulating privately or which were tucked away in corners of longer works. It gave Sharp a reputation as an anti-slavery activist and directly led to his involvement in the James Somerset case of 1771-1772.

This can be described as the start of the abolition campaign in Britain. By the last decade of the eighteenth century there were between ten and twenty thousand people of African origin in Britain, the majority in domestic service. James Somerset was a slave of Charles Stewart, a customs officer from Boston, Massachusetts. While in London, Somerset ran away from Stewart who had him 'arrested' and imprisoned on a ship in the Thames with the intention of sending him to Jamaica. Sharp immediately intervened and brought the case to court, arguing that Stewart had no right under English law to compel somebody to go out of the country against their will, regardless of any condition of servitude. The case attracted considerable interest and support from both sides, with pledges of help and money reaching Stewart from West-Indian merchants and similar help reaching Sharp from members of the African community and liberal-minded people in the capital. The presiding judge, Lord Mansfield, postponed judgement for as long as he could (he was a slave-owner himself) but finally passed judgement that English

⁶² David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 317.

⁶³ Granville Sharp, *A Representation of the Injustice and Dangerous Tendency of Tolerating Slavery or of admitting the least claim of Private Property in the persons of men in England* (London: Benjamin White and Robert Horsfield, 1769). Also by Sharp are *An Appendix to the Representation* (London: Benjamin White, 1772) and *The Just Limitations of Slavery in the Laws of God, Compared with the Unbounded Claims of the African Traders and British American Slaveholders* (London: B. White and E. and C. Dilly, 1776).

law did not give a master the right to compel a slave to leave the country. Mansfield had not outlawed slavery in England, as is sometimes supposed, but he had removed one of the most feared supposed rights of the slave owner.

The publicity surrounding the Somerset case failed to prompt an organised abolition movement although public interest and indignation was roused. As a result a small niche in the book market developed and slavery-related pamphlets started to become available. Anthony Benezet's *Some Historical Account of Guinea*, which describes the middle passage in detail, appeared in 1773 and was closely followed by John Wesley's *Thoughts on Slavery* in 1774.⁶⁴ These were important works, and yet none had a very wide readership. Benezet's books were published and read on both sides of the Atlantic but almost exclusively by his Quaker brethren. Sharp was better known for his activities in the courts than for his publications. Even Wesley's contribution probably *had few readers* beyond Methodist circles. In the next decade the situation was reversed. Although numbers of published slavery-related titles remained low in the early decade, in 1784 the number rose to more than twenty per year and continued to grow in the following years. Peaks of over 100 titles were reached in 1788 and 1792. After 1792 slavery-related titles slumped to pre-1788 figures for the remainder of the century. [Figures 1 and 2]

The rise and fall in publication figures reflects the rise and fall in the fortunes of the Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. This organisation was founded in April 1787, partly as a response to the growing calls for abolition but primarily to issue those calls itself. Within a few months its members included Granville Sharp, James Ramsay, Thomas Clarkson, and William

⁶⁴ Anthony Benezet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea, its Situation, Produce, and the General Disposition of its Inhabitants. With An Inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Slave Trade, its Nature, and Lamentable Effects* (Philadelphia, 1771), published the following year in England (London: W. Owen and E. and C. Dilly, 1772) but more widely known through the second edition published during the height of anti-slavery (London: J. Phillips, 1788); John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (London: R. Hawes, 1774).

Slavery Publications: 1780-1800

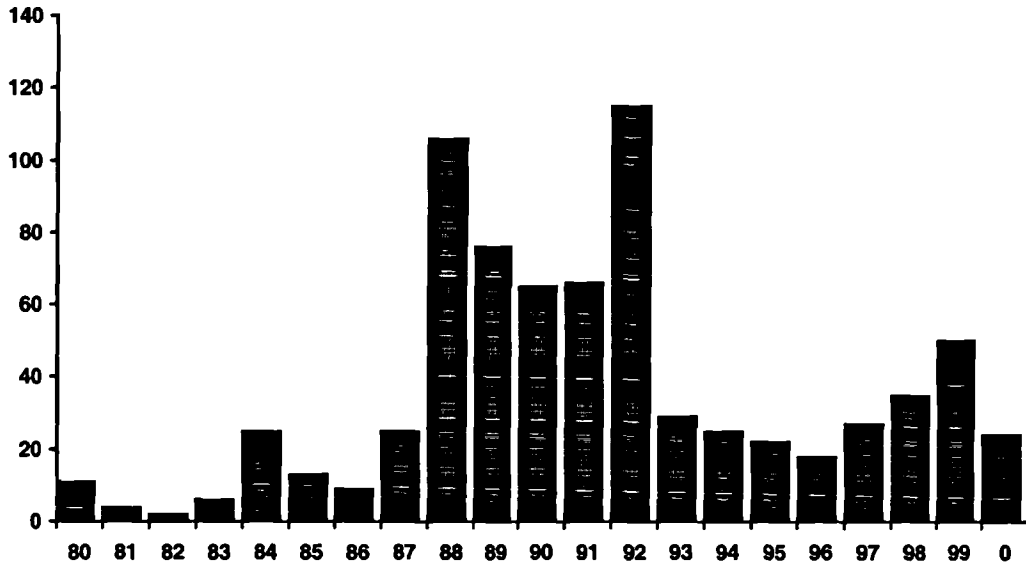


Figure 1 shows the number of slavery related titles per year, 1780-1800, demonstrating their concentration in the years 1788-92. [Source: ESTC]

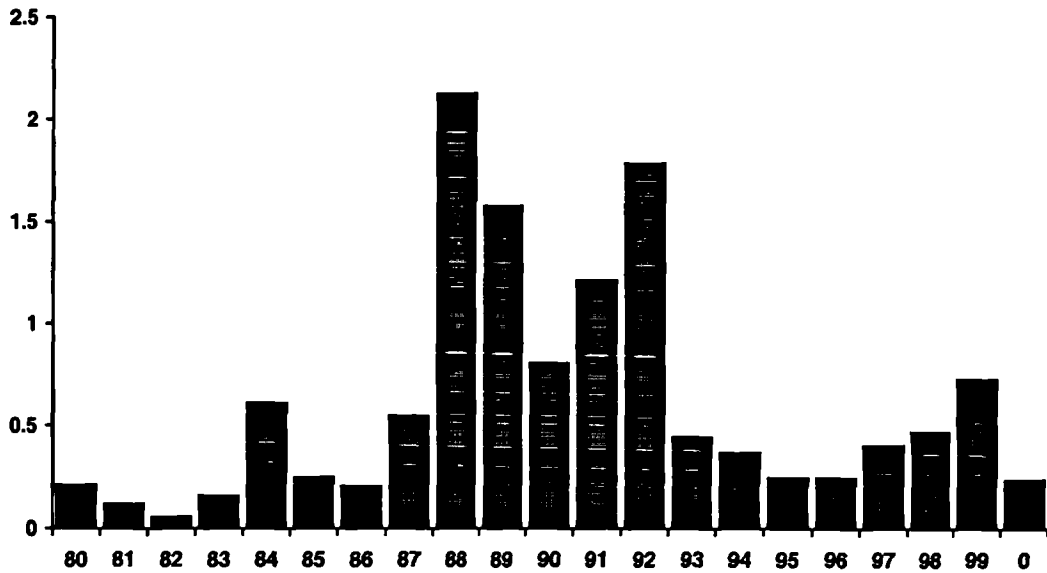


Figure 2 shows the number of slavery related titles per year, 1780-1800, expressed as a percentage of the titles per year. [Source: ESTC]

Wilberforce, all of whom are discussed in detail in this dissertation. These, and others like them, were the so-called 'Saints', largely resident at Clapham, who by combining benevolence, evangelicalism, and a moderate measure of asceticism managed to establish a group identity which has remained recognisable to this day. The society as a whole pushed for abolition by distributing pamphlets on a large scale, by organising lectures, by lobbying Members of both Houses of Parliament, and by preparing their own abolition bill, to be steered through Parliament by William Wilberforce.

The 'Clapham Saints' were not the only people to be working for abolition of the slave trade. William Wordsworth, looking back in 1805 on the anti-slavery agitation of the early 1790s, remembered 'a whole Nation crying with one voice'.⁶⁵ Though hyperbole, Wordsworth's line indicates the scale of the movement. Local abolition committees mirrored the work of the central committee by distributing literature and arranging lectures, at which they drew up and presented numerous petitions to Parliament. By the early 1790s they were also hoping to exert economic pressure with a boycott of sugar and other slave-produced goods. Most of these techniques remain familiar to political campaigners to the present day. In the 1780s they were rather newer, and in many ways we can speak of the abolition campaign as the first mass political pressure campaign in British history.

The narrative of events in Parliament is followed in detail in Chapter Five of this dissertation. Here we shall be content to say that Clarkson returned to London with considerable evidence of widespread brutality in the trade. The evidence was examined in Parliament and a bill for abolition was laid before the House. After a string of debates between 1788 and 1792 abolition was effectively wrecked by Henry Dundas who inserted the word 'gradual' into the bill. Though technically timetabled to be abolished by 1796, the slave trade was effectively retained. This blow to the movement was matched by its own collapse. Activists who had been working hard for five years suffered from 'burn-out' while those who were less

⁶⁵ 'The Prelude', in *William Wordsworth [selected poems]*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), X, 212.

committed began to lose interest. More importantly, events across the channel radically changed the nature of political debate in Britain. Abolitionism began to be associated in the public mind with radicalism and Jacobinism and, as the implications of the French Revolution became clearer, a new conservatism took hold amongst the upper and middle classes. Reports of atrocities in the slave-revolution in San Domingo further undermined support for the abolition movement. Finally, the outbreak of war with France early in 1793 underscored the impossibility of making any far-reaching changes to British naval and colonial practice. Wilberforce continued to raise the matter with Parliament, but more often than not he spoke to an empty chamber. Thomas Clarkson and others dropped out of the campaign entirely. By the middle of the 1790s abolitionism was a spent force. It did not come back onto the mainstream agenda until 1806, beyond the period examined in this dissertation, but we can note that the slave trade was abolished by the British Parliament in 1807, slavery in British colonies in 1833-1838, and slavery declared illegal in international law under the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948.

This short narrative history of slavery and abolition has been synthesised from a number of recent general accounts and as far as possible records those facts which are not widely disputed. This approach masks the fact that vigorous debates over many aspects of slavery and abolition continue to take place. Of greatest relevance here is the historiography of the abolition movement and, while it is not possible to discuss what is a huge and growing body of historical writing on the subject, it is important to be aware of the debate. This is largely concerned with why Britain abolished a trade which, on the face of it, was an extremely profitable one. Explanations vary from the economic to the cultural, with many shades of opinion in between, but can be resolved into four basic positions.

The first was originally put by Thomas Clarkson and holds that abolition was a triumph of a Christian humanitarian ethos which naturally came to the fore when the true facts about slavery were revealed to the public by campaigners such as himself. This view permeates his *History of the Rise, Progress and*

Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade which appeared in 1808.⁶⁶ This rather self-congratulatory position became historical orthodoxy throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries and was certainly the view favoured by institutional historians. The Victorian historian W.E.H. Lecky provided a famous example when he described 'the unwearied, unostentatious, and inglorious crusade of England against slavery [as being] among the three or four perfectly virtuous acts recorded in the history of nations'.⁶⁷ Dismissed as smug by most modern historians, this view nonetheless still has some currency, particularly in popular historiography.

The second view holds that slavery was abolished not for any altruistic reasons but purely because it was no longer profitable. This argument, known as the decline theory, was developed by Eric Williams in his important book *Capitalism and Slavery* which appeared in 1945 (although it was not published in Britain until 1964).⁶⁸ Williams's thesis is broader than this alone. In particular he makes a strong argument that slavery and its profits had such a profound effect on the British economy that it transformed it from being a mercantilist economy into being a capitalist one. Moreover, it was developing metropolitan capitalism which reduced plantation profits. This model is now considered to be simplistic and Williams's economic analysis, never a detailed one, has been largely superseded. Williams's figures for the profitability, or otherwise, of the plantations have been closely scrutinised and in many cases found wanting. Roger Anstey maintains that profits were neither as great early on or as poor later on as Williams suggests.⁶⁹ Seymour Drescher, in a number of studies, casts further doubts on Williams figures, considerably develops Anstey's argument, and introduces the now familiar term 'econocide' to explain the devastating effect which abolition appears to have

⁶⁶ Thomas Clarkson, *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, 2 vols (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1808).

⁶⁷ W.E.H. Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1869), I, p. 169.

⁶⁸ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London: André Deutsch, 1964).

⁶⁹ Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760-1810* (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 38-57.

had on the plantation economy.⁷⁰ It no longer seems sufficient to speak only of profits and losses when assessing the motivations of British abolitionists.

The third position holds that the abolition and emancipation campaigns were arenas in which previously disenfranchised groups within Britain, in particular, the middle classes and women, could impose their culture and ideology and flex their developing political muscle. This position is most famously explored by David Brion Davis in *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966) and *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (1975). The first of these works considers the justifications for slavery and, later, the emergence of anti-slavery in the context of European intellectual history. It is useful here for an early (if hesitant) recognition of the part that sensibility had to play in anti-slavery, especially when combined with notions of Christian benevolence.⁷¹ The second of these works has a far tighter focus, specifically the years 1770-1823, and it reopens the debate over the relationship between capitalism and slavery initialised by Eric Williams. In a celebrated analysis Davis argues that antislavery 'reflected the ideological needs of various groups and classes' and not merely the economic needs, as Williams had argued.⁷² The class implicated, the industrial middle class, embraced anti-slavery as a way of legitimising a new work ethic which depended on free labour in a free market. But anti-slavery ran deeper than this simple materialist imperative. Davis identifies a religious and cultural dimension allied to, but not simplistically determined by, the emerging economic climate. Bound up with this middle-class culture was a bundle of religious, political, and humanitarian ideas, all dependent on a prevailing openness to new thinking, which allowed for hitherto marginal groups to establish themselves in the social and political life of the nation as well as in its economy. Davis's thesis is a complex one, and one

⁷⁰ Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977) and *Slavery to Freedom: Comparative Studies in the Rise and Fall of Atlantic Slavery* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

⁷¹ Davis, *Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, pp. 333-364.

⁷² David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution: 1770-1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 42.

which has given rise to a considerable debate, but it frequently remains convincing and is challenging at all times.⁷³

On a lesser scale than Davis's work is Clare Midgley's *Women against Slavery* (1992) which argues that the part women had to play in the abolition movement has been largely written out of history. She responds with an often detailed survey of women's participation in both local and national anti-slavery organisations between 1780 and 1870 to show that women, 'despite their exclusion from positions of formal power in the national anti-slavery movement in Britain, were an integral part of that movement and played distinctive and at times leading roles'.⁷⁴ She argues that women's experiences in the abolition and emancipation campaigns were an important arena for the development of transferable political skills which could later be used by women in other political activities. She stops short, however, of drawing a simple developmental line between eighteenth-century anti-slavery campaigning and suffragism. Midgley's analysis of the eighteenth-century campaign is somewhat sketchy but more solid work has been done by Dierdre Coleman in a 1994 article. Coleman argues that women sought 'to capitalize upon fashionable anti-slavery rhetoric for their own political objectives' but in so doing they 'only increased the general murkiness of abolitionist rhetoric'.⁷⁵ Coleman's argument is not entirely persuasive, but it seems likely that further substantial work in this area will be forthcoming.

The fourth position holds that it was the slaves themselves who brought about abolition and emancipation by acts of resistance, rebellion, and direct political and cultural engagement. This argument was originally (and perhaps most powerfully) made in 1938 by C.L.R. James in his study of the San Domingo revolution, *The*

⁷³ The subsequent debate has been anthologised in *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Thomas Bender (Oxford: University of California Press, 1992).

⁷⁴ Clare Midgley, *Women against Slavery: the British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-4.

⁷⁵ Dierdre Coleman, 'Conspicuous Consumption: White Abolitionism and English Women's Protest Writing in the 1790s', *ELH*, 61 (1994), 341-362, p. 341.

Black Jacobins.⁷⁶ James's account of this revolution shows the actions of individual slaves, most famously Toussaint L'Ouverture, but also examines the mass action of countless unnamed slaves who were part of the creation of Haiti, the first independent nation governed by former slaves. While compelling, this history is confined to Haiti, a former French plantation colony, and so its relationship with the history of British abolitionism is an indirect one. Where it has had an impact is in its general argument that the slaves were not merely passive victims but were also engaged in securing their own liberty. Clearly shown to be true for Haiti, this principle, it could be argued, holds equally true for Britain and its colonies.

A number of works have appeared in recent years making exactly this case. Of these two have been particularly influential. In *Staying Power* (1984) Peter Fryer notes that 'there were Africans in Britain before the English came here' and proceeds to recount the history of black people in Britain from the Roman period to the 1980s.⁷⁷ His account of the abolition movement does not deny that people of many backgrounds took part but it steers the focus firmly away from the 'Clapham Saints' and towards those Africans, like Olaudah Equiano, who were central to the campaign but whose contribution had been frequently overlooked. Furthermore, he brings to light many of the forgotten acts of individual resistance which he argues combined to undermine slavery in Britain, the most important such act that of James Somerset which culminated in the Mansfield decision of 1772. Geographically broader in its analysis is Robin Blackburn's *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* (1988). Blackburn's account is an integrated one, bringing together many of the various strands of research and opinion on the social, cultural and economic causes of abolition. However, he places a great deal of emphasis on the part the slaves played in their own emancipation, bringing in details not only of slave resistance in Britain but in the plantations as well. The result is an account of abolition which is thoroughly convincing in its rejection of both monocausal and entirely Eurocentric explanations, and which has become something of a model for

⁷⁶ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938), 3rd edn (London: Allison and Busby, 1980).

⁷⁷ Fryer, p. 1.

subsequent histories. Blackburn's analysis has in many places informed and guided the discussion of abolitionism in this dissertation.⁷⁸

The version of events in which Africans are central to their own emancipation is inherent in recent literary studies. Students on both sides of the Atlantic are increasingly being asked to read black self-representations with Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* rapidly becoming a cornerstone of the established literary canon. Vincent Carretta's recent Penguin editions of Equiano, Ignatius Sancho, and Quobna Ottobah Cugoano (and a forthcoming edition of the poems of Phyllis Wheatley) have presented the texts in a form which is both scholarly and readily available.⁷⁹ The writings of white abolitionists remain hard to find and, despite a generous selection in facsimile edited by Peter Kitson and others, where available tend to be beyond the budget of the average student or reader.⁸⁰ This state of affairs appears to have come about for two main reasons. First, the three texts appear at the beginning of a long tradition of slave narratives which, regardless of their literary qualities, have proved of great benefit for historians wishing to recount the experience of slavery. Second, the political climate arising from the process of African and Asian decolonisation in the second half of the twentieth century combined with movements such as the civil rights movement in the United States and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa have brought a new focus to the study of the eighteenth-century anti-slavery movement, a focus recognised by historians such as Fryer and Blackburn but one which has also made a strong mark on literary studies.

While the historiography of slavery and abolition is significant to this dissertation, it has little to say about the role and history of representation. Edward Said, in

⁷⁸ Also in this tradition are the many works of James Walvin, including: *The Black Presence: A Documentary History of the Negro in England, 1555-1860* (London: Orbach and Chambers, 1971); *Black and White: the Negro and English Society, 1555-1945* (London: Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1973); *England, Slaves and Freedom, 1776-1838* (London: Macmillan, 1986) and *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (London: HarperCollins, 1992).

⁷⁹ *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African* (1782), ed. Vincent Carretta (London: Penguin, 1998); Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787), ed. Vincent Carretta (London: Penguin, 1999); Equiano, *op. cit.*

⁸⁰ *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period*, 8 vols, ed. Peter Kitson *et al* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1999).

Culture and Imperialism (1993), reminds us that culture, which he defines very broadly to include all 'the arts of description, communication, and representation',⁸¹ can be viewed as 'a sort of theatre where various political and ideological causes engage one another.'⁸² He notes that slavery, racism, colonialism, and imperialism were all justified by reference to ideological debates which were worked out in cultural productions generally and, in many cases, in specifically aesthetic productions such as novels, poems, and plays. His understanding of the eighteenth-century background is not a detailed one and in many places his reading of eighteenth-century literature is less than convincing. However, in this dissertation it is assumed and often demonstrated that cultural productions, be they political tracts or newspaper reports, novels or poems, are at the centre of a debate about the meaning and significance of slavery, the colonies, and the imperial project, a debate which in a great number of cases concludes with powerful ideological justifications for the continuance of those projects. Where this dissertation departs from Said is that it also identifies a cultural disquiet over the worst excesses of imperialism, a disquiet which is first tentatively expressed in the literature of sensibility, and which leads to a sentimental rhetoric of anti-slavery. In this context it is also important to note that in the post-colonial period (that is, the period commencing with Indian decolonisation in 1948) academics in literary and cultural studies have developed an extensive and sophisticated set of theoretical models for reading both colonial and post-colonial literature. Most of these models are based on historical conditions and intellectual debates current only in the twentieth century and few take into account the eighteenth-century (and earlier) historical and intellectual background. Applying them to eighteenth-century literature would in most cases run the risk of historical anachronism.

This dissertation is comprised of two parts. Part One examines eighteenth-century notions of rhetoric and investigates them as the site of a debate between politics and the sentimental. It locates the rhetoric of sensibility amongst the 'new rhetorics' and discusses the workings of this rhetoric. Chapter One looks at

⁸¹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), p. xii.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

traditional ('neo-classical' or 'Ciceronian') rhetoric and contrasts this with some of the many varieties of the 'new rhetoric'. In particular it looks at the philosophers John Locke, David Hume and Adam Smith, as well as Edmund Burke and Hugh Blair, and considers them as practitioners of the 'new rhetoric'. It suggests that what these writers (Locke excepted) had in common as rhetoricians was a belief in the persuasive power of sympathy and this belief caused them to propound a sentimental notion of rhetoric. Chapter Two looks at particular rhetorical strategies employed during the sentimental period and identifies the main characteristics of the rhetoric of sensibility. Terms for several proofs and tropes of this rhetoric are introduced and explored in readings of a broad range of late-eighteenth-century writing.

Part Two is comprised of three chapters and a short conclusion. It explores the working of the rhetoric of sensibility in the late-eighteenth-century debate over the slave trade. Chapter Three examines the relationship between slavery and literary sentimentalism, looking at the way in which imaginative writings used sentimental rhetoric to advance the idea of anti-slavery. It considers the extent to which abolitionist poems, plays and novels contributed to the development both of a sentimental rhetoric and a popular discourse of anti-slavery. Novels by Sarah Scott, Henry Mackenzie, and Laurence Sterne, poems by Thomas Day, Hannah More, and William Roscoe, and plays by Thomas Bellamy and August Ferdinand von Kotzebue are amongst those considered. Chapter Four examines the use of sentiment in non-fictional slavery-related texts. It explores the ways in which the sentimental rhetorical strategies outlined in Chapter Two were adopted by both pro and anti-slavery writers of the 1780s including James Ramsay, Thomas Clarkson, James Tobin, and Gordon Turnbull before looking at the contribution to the debate made by three Afro-British writers: Ignatius Sancho, Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, and Olaudah Equiano. It concludes that writers on both sides of the abolition debate found it necessary to make an appeal to the feelings of their audience, in sentimental terms, in order to attract the support of the readers of sentimental novels and poetry. Chapter Five looks at the way in which William Wilberforce, the main parliamentary advocate for abolition, used sentimental rhetoric in his

parliamentary speeches. This chapter also looks closely at the conditions of publication and readership of parliamentary speeches by examining the way in which newspapers and periodicals were, for the first time, allowed to print parliamentary debates after the 1770s. It notes that for this period definitive versions of parliamentary speeches were not available and it examines sentimental rhetoric and reportage by comparing different versions of the same speeches by Wilberforce. It concludes that sentimental writing in parliamentary reports does not necessarily reflect language actually used by the Member of Parliament, but that a sentimental rhetoric can clearly be discerned in the reports of Wilberforce's speeches. The short conclusion examines in general terms the fate of anti-slavery literature after the revolutions in France and Haiti.

In summary, this dissertation argues that a distinct sentimental rhetoric can be observed at work in texts relating to the anti-slavery debate in the late eighteenth century, and that this rhetoric transcended form to the extent that sentimental rhetoric could be found in texts ranging from sonnets written as the effusion of the moment by young people to speeches delivered to Parliament by elder statesmen. In conclusion it argues that the rhetoric of sensibility was central to the anti-slavery debate in the 1780s and early 1790s but after this time anti-slavery writers increasingly turned away from sentimentalism and towards a rhetoric more akin to the Gothic and, later, to one more closely allied with Romanticism. However, the sentimental rhetoric identified in this dissertation never completely disappeared from the anti-slavery debate. Instead it continued to evolve into forms which existed alongside and complemented these emerging genres. It is with this observation that the conclusion points the way for further study.

Part One

*The Theory of Sentimental
Rhetoric*

Chapter 1

Old and New Rhetorics in the Eighteenth Century

Old Rhetorics in the Eighteenth Century

Adam Smith, whose lectures on rhetoric and belles lettres at the University of Edinburgh would come to be seen as a defining moment in the development of the 'new rhetoric', looked back with contempt on the many textbooks of rhetoric which had appeared in Britain over the previous three centuries. These works, he argued, echoing an increasingly familiar complaint in the eighteenth century, depended too strongly on long lists of categories of rhetoric, and demanded that students commit to memory the names and descriptions of various figures of speech and thought, without sufficient explanation of the context in which they might be used. It was, he argued,

from the consideration of these figures and the divisions and subdivisions of them, that so many systems of rhetorick both ancient and modern have been formed. They are generally a very silly set of books and not at all instructive.¹

Smith could well have had John Holmes's *The Art of Rhetoric Made Easy* in mind when he wrote these words. Holmes's book, published in 1739, devotes more than half its length to listing these figures of speech and, in case we are in any doubt as to their usefulness, Holmes is fulsome in their praise in his preface:

What Grace and Beauty are to be met with in FIGURES, what Delight and extensive Significancy are contain'd in TROPES, what nervous Force and

¹ Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J.C. Bryce and A.S. Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 26.

*harmonious Pith we experience in REPETITIONS or Turns, and what Power and Inexpressible Influence of Persuasion in proper PRONUNCIATION and consonant Action.*²

Holmes's textbook did not stand alone, nor was it the first of its kind. English language handbooks of rhetoric had been popular from the sixteenth century and many later publications drew on a major work of rhetoric published in 1553: Thomas Wilson's *The Arte of Rhetorique*, which went through seven editions in the sixteenth century. Influential seventeenth-century textbooks included Thomas Farnaby's *Index Rhetoricus* which appeared in 1625 and *Troposchematologia* (1648) which was based on extracts from Farnaby's earlier work.³ A number of books following a similar pattern were published during the eighteenth century amongst which John Ward's *A System of Oratory* (1759) and John Stirling's *A System of Rhetoric* (1733) are probably the best known. All of these books relied heavily on the long lists and charts of figures of speech which Adam Smith had found so silly. But despite Smith's reservations most of these works were extremely popular, going through numerous editions in the eighteenth century and before.⁴

² John Holmes, *The Art of Rhetoric made easy: or, the Elements of Oratory Briefly Stated, and fitted for the Practise of the Studious Youth of Great-Britain and Ireland* (London: A. Parker, A. Bettesworth and C. Hitch, 1739), 'The Preface'.

³ Eighteenth-century rhetoric textbooks owed much to three sixteenth-century works. The most important was: Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique, for the use of all soche as are studious of Eloquence, set forthe in Englishe* (London: R. Grafton, 1553). The seventh and final edition appeared in 1585. George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (London: Richard Field, 1589) and Abraham Fraunce, *The Arcadian Rhetoricke* (London: Thomas Orwin, 1588) both appeared in one edition only. Petrus Ramus, *The Logicke* (London: n.p., 1574), was also influential although it deviated from the mainstream by arguing that most of the five faculties of rhetoric more properly belong to the discipline of logic. In the seventeenth century Thomas Farnaby produced the popular Latin work *Index Rhetoricus: Scholis & institutioni tenerioris ætatis accomodatus. Cui adjiciuntur Formulæ Oratoriæ. Operâ & studio Thomæ Farnabii* (London: Kyngston and Allot, 1633). This achieved a thirteenth edition in 1713. In 1648 a chart of the various divisions of classical rhetoric was extracted from this work and published as *Troposchematologia: Maximam Partem ex Indice Rhetorico, FARNABII Deprompta, Additus Insuper Anglicanis Exemplis. In usum Scholæ Regiæ Grammaticalis apud St. Edmundi Burgum* (London: Ri. Royston, 1648). As the title suggests a number of English examples are added which take the form of doggerel verse couplets, for example (p. 7) 'Homoioteleuton with like sounds does end: / *Amend*, to vertue *bend*, and love thy *friend*.' This short work was extremely popular and went through fifteen editions by 1767.

⁴ In 1733 much of Thomas Farnaby's *Troposchematologia* was incorporated into a pamphlet textbook by John Stirling entitled *A System of Rhetoric in a Method Entirely New: containing all the TROPES and FIGURES necessary to illustrate the Classics, both Poetical and Historical*

What these works had in common, in addition to the lists of figures of speech, was that they were an expression of mainstream classical rhetoric developed for the English market, if not always written in the English language. The story of the development of classical rhetoric has often been told and we need not examine in detail here the contributions made by Isocrates and Plato, by Aristotle, and by Longinus, Cicero, and Quintilian.⁵ It is enough to say that by the late middle ages rhetoric was clearly understood to be a science comprised of a number of rules which could—and should—be learned. These rules were largely based on a small number of the classical works, in particular, Cicero's *De Inventione* and *De Oratore*, and the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herrenium* which was mistakenly attributed to Cicero until late in the fifteenth century. These works alone were thought sufficient to provide a complete system of rhetoric for the instruction of any student, a system usually referred to as either Ciceronian or classical rhetoric.

Since the rules of this classical rhetoric are rather less well known now than in the eighteenth century, it may be useful to briefly state what they were. In the first place this rhetoric was primarily understood as being the study of correct public speaking. The pejorative use of the word 'rhetoric' in which it has come to signify hollow words, uttered without conviction, usually for personal political

(London: Thomas Astley, 1733). Whether Stirling's system was 'entirely new' is doubtful. The chief innovation seems to be that the verse couplets are, if possible, worse than in the *Troposchematologia*. Students are now encouraged to learn that 'Antiphrasis makes Words to disagree / From Sense; if rightly they derived be.' (p. 3). This pamphlet was extremely popular, probably because it was cheap, going through thirteen editions by 1795. John Holmes's *The Art of Rhetoric Made Easy* (1739) was longer and pricier but still managed six editions by 1766. Two other major works of classical rhetoric appeared in the eighteenth century. The first was John Ward's *A System of Oratory Delivered in a Course of Lectures Publically read at Gresham College, London: To which is prefixed an Inaugural Oration, Spoken in Latin, before the Commencement of the Lectures, according to the usual Custom*, 2 vols (London: John Ward, 1759). This very full and balanced representation of the classical method was also rather expensive and managed only a single edition. Shorter, but also managing only one edition was Thomas Gibbons, *Rhetoric; or, a view of its principal Tropes and Figures, in their Origin and Powers: with a variety of Rules to escape Errors and Blemishes and Attain Propriety and Elegance in Composition* (London: J. and W. Oliver, James Buckland, and John Payne, 1767). As the title suggests this was another survey of figures of speech.

⁵ Useful introductions to classical rhetoric can be found in: George Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), Peter Dixon, *Rhetoric* (London, Methuen, 1971), Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1988) and Thomas M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

advancement, was certainly known to the eighteenth century, but was not the dominant usage. Johnson, for example, did not allude to it. For him 'rhetoric' had two senses: 'the act of speaking not merely with propriety, but with art and elegance' and, more plainly, 'the power of persuasion; oratory'. Johnson may have been influenced by John Holmes's compendious definition which appeared in 1739:

A. RHETORIC is the Art of *Speaking* or *Writing well and ornamentally* on any Subject.

Its Principal *End* is to *Instruct, Persuade, and Please*.

Its Chief *Office* is to seek what may be *most conducive* to Persuasion.

B. The *Subject* it treats on is *any Thing whatever*, whether it be Moral, Philosophical, or Divine.⁶

As this definition would suggest, the study of rhetoric was seen as a central part of the curriculum and, indeed, the classical education received by the majority of wealthy Englishmen, and some English women, involved lessons in rhetoric in which the rules would have to be learned in Latin and Greek as well as in English. For the elite, proficiency in the art of persuasion was seen as an essential stepping stone on the road to a career in politics, in the law, or in the pulpit and in this respect eighteenth-century pragmatism was in considerable agreement with sixteenth-century humanism.

Although a number of different textbooks of rhetoric appeared during the eighteenth century, the basic rules of rhetoric remained largely the same. The student of classical rhetoric could expect to learn that rhetoric was divided into three main areas: those of judicial or forensic rhetoric, which was the rhetoric of the law courts; deliberative rhetoric, which was the rhetoric of the political arena; and demonstrative rhetoric which dealt with praise and ceremony. Within each of these areas the rules for drawing up and presenting a speech or a piece of polemical writing were broadly the same and were discussed under five headings known as the five arts or the five faculties of rhetoric. These, to give them their

⁶ Holmes, *Art of Rhetoric*, p. 1.

Latin names, were *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria*, and *pronuntiatio* which can be translated into English as invention, arrangement, style, memory, and action or delivery. Each of these faculties was further subdivided until every possible aspect of rhetoric was covered.

Invention concerned itself with proving an argument, either by ‘inartificial’ means such as the production of hard evidence, or by ‘artificial’ means such as by reason or by appealing to the audience’s feelings about the case. In court, for example, a smoking gun would fit into the first category while the deductions of a Sherlock Holmes or a tearful protestation of innocence would fit into the second. ‘Artificial’ proof had three subdivisions: *ethos* (ethical proof), *logos* (logical proof), and *pathos* (emotional proof). *Ethos* concerned itself with the speaker or subject’s personality and standing, *pathos* was concerned with appeals to the audience’s emotions, while *logos* was particularly concerned with deductive reasoning. The faculty of invention also contained many standard arguments known as topics and commonplaces, long lists of which would appear in textbooks.

Arrangement laid down clear rules for structuring an argument with seven steps to be followed from the introduction to the conclusion. These steps were known as the exordium, narration, proposition, division, proof, refutation, and conclusion and students of rhetoric were advised for the most part to follow them rigidly. The faculty of *elocutio*, or style (the faculty which most irked Adam Smith) provided rules on how to fit the style to the subject and students of rhetoric could choose from the grand, the middle, and the low style. Here great emphasis was laid on the qualities of style which students learned were purity, clarity, decorum, and ornament. Under the heading of ornament appeared the long lists of figures of speech and figures of thought, sometimes several hundred in all. These ranged from the familiar, such as metaphor and hyperbole, to the exotic such as epanorthosis and antisagoge.⁷ Memory, the fourth faculty, was largely concerned

⁷ Epanorthosis is ‘a figure of speech in which something said is corrected or commented on’ while antisagoge is ‘a complex figurative device in which an order or precept is given and a reward offered if it is obeyed, and a punishment threatened if it is ignored’. J.A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 3rd edn (London: Penguin, 1992).

with systems of memory training, essential in the eighteenth century and before as most speakers were expected to perform from memory rather than read out a speech. Delivery, the last of the five faculties and in the eighteenth century known as action, laid down rules for the presentation of the argument. Like memory it applied only to spoken rhetoric and concerned itself with the tone and amplification of the speaker's voice as well as with the body language of the speaker.⁸

Before the middle of the eighteenth century the majority of textbooks of rhetoric varied little from this pattern. Where they did so they tended to emphasise one or another of the faculties or to omit some of these categories altogether. For example, Farnaby's *Troposchematologia*, an extract from his longer *Index Rhetoricus*, dealt only with style and gave prominent attention to the figures of speech which were traditionally organised under the heading of ornament. However, this was not the only possible narrowing of the scope of rhetoric. One group of practising eighteenth-century rhetoricians saw as most important the fifth faculty of rhetoric, *pronuntiatio*, the translation of which caused almost as many problems as the argument over how it should be used. While the standard translation in the eighteenth century was 'action', amongst one group of rhetoricians the translation adopted was 'elocution'. For this group the most important part of rhetoric was the ability to present a speech well using standardised intonation, gesture, and dialect. Like some pre-Socratic rhetoricians, such as Gorgias, this group had relatively little concern for the content of a speech. This tendency in rhetoric is known as the elocutionary movement and has been described, somewhat paradoxically, as 'a futureless idea that was destined against logic and common sense to have a two hundred year future in England and America'.⁹

The elocutionary movement, despite lasting in one form or another into the twentieth century, was a departure from the mainstream of rhetorical theory and

⁸ Dixon, *Rhetoric*, and Robert Cockcroft and Susan M. Cockcroft, *Persuading People: An Introduction to Rhetoric* (London: Macmillan, 1992), provide short but clear introductions to the rules of rhetoric for the modern reader.

⁹ Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 146.

practice. However, its popularity provides evidence that traditional rhetoric was no longer meeting the needs of a rapidly changing society. Elocution was principally concerned with spoken discourse but this was something of an anachronism in a society in which the publication and influence of printed texts was increasing at an enormous rate. What was needed was not merely good elocution but a system of rhetoric which would embrace the opportunities offered by this rapid growth in printed material. And since most newly printed texts were modern texts, rather than editions or translations of classical standards, it was no longer appropriate for rhetoric to take solely as its model the rules laid down by Cicero, Quintilian, and Longinus. By the second half of the eighteenth century the discipline of rhetoric was overdue for change.

New Rhetorics

Critics have come to recognise a movement in eighteenth-century rhetoric which encompassed a number of different writers and teachers, not all of them in complete agreement, whose works possess enough similarities to be grouped together under the heading of 'the new rhetoric'. Wilbur Howell recognises six issues addressed by the new rhetoricians. The first issue 'concerned the question whether rhetoric should continue to limit itself to persuasive popular discourse' or widen its interests to literature in general to include 'even the forms of poetry'. The second issue considered whether rhetoric should 'continue to limit itself to the field of artistic proof prescribed by classical theory', in effect to the lists of topics and commonplaces recorded by classical rhetoricians and their followers, or should widen its scope in this respect. A third issue, central to logos, or artificial logical proof, asked 'whether the form of rhetorical proof should be described as fundamentally enthymematic [or] fundamentally inductive'. (An enthymeme is an incomplete syllogism in which one of the premises is omitted as being self-evident.) The fourth issue, again concerning proof, asked 'whether rhetoric should deal only in probabilities, or whether it is also its responsibility to achieve as full a measure of proof as the situation allows'. The fifth issue 'concerned the question whether a

speech had to adhere to the six-part form so fully elaborated in Ciceronian rhetoric, or whether a simpler form was desirable'. The sixth and final issue asked 'whether rhetorical style should be ornate, intricate, and heavily committed to the use of tropes and figures, or should be plain and unstudied'.¹⁰

Of Howell's six issues, the first two are concerned with the scope of rhetoric. The central two with rhetorical proof, and the final two with style. In this section we shall examine how these three areas—scope, proof, and style—were approached by the new rhetoricians, and we shall examine the extent to which these new rhetoricians could either be viewed as sentimental or *productive of* arguments and techniques which could be used by sentimental persuaders. However, it must be remembered that the new rhetoric was not part of an organised movement. It was instead merely a tendency to reject the more cumbersome and restricting forms of classical rhetoric and to fit what remained to the philosophical, political, and social realities of the eighteenth century. Within this loose grouping there was room for dozens of contributors, with as many different slants of opinion. In this short introduction we shall examine just five: John Locke, David Hume, Edmund Burke, Adam Smith, and Hugh Blair.

The new rhetoric was an eighteenth-century development but its antecedents can be found in earlier years. If we wish to nominate a text as its moment of inception we could do worse than choose the publication of John Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* in 1689. At the end of a chapter entitled 'Of the Abuse of Words' Locke attacks both the traditional forms of rhetoric and the practitioners of that rhetoric:

If we would speak of things as they are, we must allow, that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgement; and so indeed are perfect cheat: and therefore however laudable or allowable oratory may

¹⁰ Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic*, pp. 441-7, *passim*.

render them in harangues and popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform and instruct, wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or the person that makes use of them [...] 'Tis evident how much men love to deceive, and be deceived, since rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit, has its established professors, is publicly taught, and has always been had in great reputation: and, I doubt not, but it will be thought great boldness, if not brutality in me to have said thus much against it. *Eloquence*, like the fair sex, has too prevailing Beauties in it, to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And 'tis in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving, wherein men find pleasure to be deceived.¹¹

Locke's criticisms of rhetoric are clear on two of the three areas which Howell identifies as being the concerns of the new rhetoric: scope and style. Locke's criticisms of ornate rhetorical style are straightforward enough: 'all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented', he tells us, 'are perfect cheat', at least as far as the dissemination of knowledge is concerned. He is prepared, however, to tolerate these 'arts of deceiving' where they lead to pleasure and by this he presumably means when they are used in poetry, drama, and works of fiction. Locke has no problem with eloquence in this setting, nor does he see the use of rhetoric as inappropriate in the context of 'harangues and popular addresses'. It is, however, his assertion that rhetoric is inappropriate in 'all discourses that pretend to inform and instruct' which is the most interesting. This is the voice of Locke the scientist, the empirical philosopher, and fellow of the Royal Society speaking here, the Royal Society whose members were notoriously distrustful of both the claims of classical rhetoric and classical logic, and this short phrase tells us much about the problems faced by rhetoric in the age of enlightenment.

¹¹ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689), ed. Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 452.

Locke is not merely discussing the scope of rhetoric. He is also questioning the underlying philosophical basis for the traditionally dominant system of rhetorical proof. Aristotle had recognised that proof could be reasoned both inductively and deductively but induction (which in rhetoric he called 'paradigm' or 'example') was subordinated to deduction, with the syllogism, and the syllogism's near relation the enthymeme, given preference over paradigm.¹² For this reason (and at some risk of being simplistic) we can say that traditional rhetoric, with its dependence on deductive reasoning and the enthymeme, provided an imperfect medium for the dissemination of the new scientific knowledge which was founded on experimentation and observation and relied more on inductive than deductive reasoning. This problem goes to the core of traditional systems of rhetorical proof. Textbooks of rhetoric, as we have seen, provided long lists of topics and commonplaces amongst which were to be found the approved syllogisms and enthymemes. Many of these originated with Aristotle; all were derived from classical philosophy. The logical proofs provided by the traditional rhetoric therefore constituted a closed system in which the orator could do nothing but enumerate old themes. The problem for Locke and for all empirical scientists was that very often these themes could not support new advances in learning. Locke saw that traditional rhetoric was 'perfect cheat' not because he distrusted the clever words of orators—he was quite able to see through those—but because he saw that rhetoric was premised on a closed and thus flawed system of philosophical proof.

The implications of Locke's views are that since the patterns of traditional rhetorical proof within the faculty of invention are no longer to be trusted the topics and commonplaces become an irrelevance, to be used by woolly and unoriginal thinkers only. The only proof which was acceptable to the scientist was that which was inartificial. The artificial proofs of ethos, pathos, and logos which had come to dominate this faculty of rhetoric, were of little use to the scientific thinker, who inferred from actual observation and wished to pass on his findings

¹² Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, trans. George A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 40.

without ornament. Classical rhetoric, which had never been much concerned with inartificial proof, was clearly defective in this respect. In this way Locke opened up a fundamental split within rhetoric, which was later to be used to advantage by the new rhetoricians. Although the classicist John Holmes was later to argue that what rhetoric 'treats on is *any Thing whatever*, whether it be Moral, Philosophical, or Divine', Locke saw that rhetoric could only treat on subjects 'wherein men find pleasure to be deceived'. Thus was the art of persuading cut into two with rhetoric, the arts, opinion, amusement and the emotions on one side and teaching, the sciences, fact, instruction, and intellect on the other.

David Hume was another major thinker who commented on rhetoric but unlike Locke he appeared not to criticise eloquence but rather to lament its demise. 'In ancient times', he tells us in his essay 'Of Eloquence', 'no work of genius was thought to require so great parts and capacity, as the speaking in public'. Not so with modern times:

Of all the polite and learned nations, ENGLAND alone possesses a popular government, or admits into the legislature such numerous assemblies as can be supposed to lie under the domain of eloquence. But what has ENGLAND to boast of in this particular?

Hume's argument is that since rhetoric is associated with popular government, or democracy, and since the democratic element in the British constitution was comparatively strong, then for these reasons eloquence should be thriving. Unfortunately, it is not thriving, a situation which Hume lays at the door of the politicians, who have bored their audience by either following the rules of rhetoric too doggedly, thus appearing wooden and studied, or by not following them at all. Hume concludes by advocating a middle way between these extremes. He argues that:

Their great affectation of extemporary discourses has made them reject all order and method, which seems so requisite to argument, and without which it

is scarcely possible to produce an entire conviction on the mind. It is not, that one would recommend many divisions in a public discourse, unless the subject very evidently offer them: But it is easy, without this formality, to observe a method, and make that method conspicuous to the hearers, who will be infinitely pleased to see the arguments rise naturally from one another, and will retain a more thorough persuasion, than can arise from the strongest reasons, which are thrown together in confusion.¹³

Hume's essay has itself occasioned some confusion among critics keen to pigeon-hole Hume as either in favour of or opposed to classical rhetoric. Howell asserts at once that the essay is 'of course, an endorsement of the values of the old and a denial of the leading tenets of the new rhetoric'. Worse still, the essay is:

Curiously static, curiously unhistorical, and curiously antiquarian [...] and yet [Hume] is so fully a member of the empirical tradition of Bacon and Locke, and so modern in his own literary idiom and style, that his essay 'Of Eloquence' cannot be made to belong wholly to the school of the Neo-Ciceronians like Ward and Holmes.¹⁴

The reason Hume 'cannot be made to belong' is, quite simply, because he does not belong. Adam Potkay sees this but also argues that the paradoxes inherent in Hume's essay are indicative of a far larger debate about the role of eloquence in eighteenth-century society. Howell charts the development of the new rhetoric, viewing Adam Smith as a key player, and dismissing Hume's contribution as an aberration. Potkay sees the difficulties presented by Hume's essay as a starting point for his entire thesis which, broadly speaking, concerns the conflict between the ideals of ancient eloquence and those of an emerging polite style. This thesis is of some importance to the study of the rhetoric of sensibility and here it is useful to examine Potkay's observations on Hume's 'sentimental politics of oratory' in greater detail. Briefly stated, Potkay maintains that 'eloquence [...] becomes a

¹³ David Hume, 'Of Eloquence', *Essays*, 2nd edition (1742), reprinted in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (1777), ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), pp. 97-110.

¹⁴ Howell, pp. 615-6.

vivid illustration—if not the literary origin—of the doctrine of sympathy at the heart of Hume’s moral philosophy’. That this doctrine is amply expressed in Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, particularly in the third book, is taken as understood. Indeed, Hume’s theory of sympathy, alongside his assertion that man is a fundamentally irrational animal, is accepted by many as one of the orthodoxies of eighteenth-century philosophy. Potkay’s contribution to this is to suggest that ‘Hume’s doctrine of sympathy derives rather directly from classical rhetorical descriptions of “action” or “delivery”’, the faculty of *pronuntiatio* which inspired the elocutionary movement. Potkay justifies this by reference to Cicero’s arguments, from *De Oratore*, on the affective power of rhetorical action before, in a key paragraph, looking closely at part of Hume’s essay:

In ‘Of Eloquence,’ sympathy explains how the audience ‘accompanies’ the orator in his ‘bold and excessive’ passions. But the orator, for his part, cannot merely feign his passions but rather must be an adept method actor. Despite Hume’s nod to the Horatian (and Longinian) dictum that the greatest art is to conceal art, the orator is ultimately represented less as an artist manipulating his audience’s sympathy than as a man feeling with men: ‘The ancient orators [...] hurried away with such a torrent of sublime and pathetic, that they left their hearers no leisure to perceive the artifice, by which they were deceived. Nay, to consider the matter aright, they were not deceived by any artifice. The orator, by the force of his own genius and eloquence, first inflamed himself with anger, indignation, pity, sorrow; and then communicated those impetuous movements to his audience’. The ‘impetuous movements’ between orator and audience are properly ‘the movements of the heart’ of Hume’s sentimentalist psychology, the sympathetic impulses that connect individuals and provide the basis for social morality—which is, for Hume, the only meaningful morality.

Potkay’s argument then moves beyond the operation of rhetoric at its point of delivery to a consideration of the political consequences of this theory. ‘Accordingly’, he argues, ‘the politics of eloquence, like the ethics of sympathy on

which it relies, is fundamentally arational. Hume's ideal democracy relies upon an intercourse of hearts.' He concludes by arguing that:

In a commercial age, sympathy becomes a vestigial myth of passionate solidarity. It is a myth endorsed by those who, like Hume, feel at ease in an imaginary scene of oratory. But for philosophers less sanguine about the justness of our untutored responses, the passionate appeal of oratory provides a perennial source of anxiety.¹⁵

This observation is completely in accord with many of the criticisms which were levelled against the discourse of sensibility. Eighteenth-century critics, who in many cases were very far from being philosophers, frequently voiced their disquiet at the way in which the 'arational' discourse of sensibility appealed to the undereducated, in particular to the young, to women, and to people whose social position denied them a formal education. If, as Potkay maintains, Hume's sentimentalised concept of sympathy derives in the first place from the action of classical oratory, this is doubly disturbing to critics of sensibility, as it suggests that sensibility itself is rooted in the art of persuasion. The implications of this are far-reaching. If sensibility is based on persuasion then it is not too large a step to imagine that the discourse of sensibility itself is a sort of manifesto for the undereducated and the marginalised in society. Thus it could be argued that a theory of sensibility based on Hume's works actively threatened both cultural and social hierarchies in the eighteenth century.

There are, of course, many objections to this, not least that Hume's *Treatise* was by and large an unread book in the eighteenth century and that the initially conservative appearance of his essay on eloquence was almost certainly the reading favoured by most who took up the book. But this is not to underestimate the disturbing power which many saw in sentimental works, nor to say that the link between sentiment and rhetoric was insignificant. Hume's widely read essay was

¹⁵ Adam Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 45-51, *passim*.

an important point in the development of the new rhetoric and furthered the link between the emerging discourse of sensibility and the long-standing discipline of rhetoric. While Hume had relatively little to say on the scope of rhetoric, other than to argue that it should regain some of the territory it had anciently held, and little new to say on rhetorical style, he made important additions to the theory of rhetorical proof. In effect Hume is calling for a resurgence in the use of that part of ‘artificial proof’ known as pathos. And rather than seeing pathos as a thing in itself, beyond philosophical explanation, he provides it with a mechanism, the theory of sympathy. This theory, which Potkay convincingly argues ‘derives rather directly from classical rhetorical descriptions of “action”’ is also the theory which underpins much of the discourse of sensibility. For Hume a good orator was a man who could touch the hearts of his audience: ‘the principles of every passion’, he tells us, ‘and of every sentiment, is in every man; and when touched properly, they rise to life, and warm the heart’.¹⁶ A good orator was also one who gave his speeches a clear structure without adhering slavishly to the classical forms of arrangement. In ‘Of Eloquence’ Hume is not promoting, as Howell suggests, a simple endorsement of the old and a denial of the new. Rather, he is calling for a reconfiguration of the old to bring rhetoric in line with the growing movement to bring emotions to the fore. Hume may not be proposing a sentimental approach to rhetoric, but his argument shows unmistakable signs of bringing rhetoric and sensibility closer together.

Fifteen years after Hume’s essay there appeared a short work on aesthetic theory by the young Edmund Burke. The *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and The Beautiful* set out to explore, as the title makes clear, what was understood by the two terms ‘sublime’ and ‘beautiful’. Along the way Burke had a few things to say about sympathy and the passions which have a direct bearing on the development of the rhetoric of sensibility. In particular, Burke’s belief in the affective power of rhetoric, combined with an interest in the reasons why we appear to enjoy representations of pain or suffering, unite to create an

¹⁶ Hume, ‘Of Eloquence’, p. 107.

approach to rhetoric, if not an actual system of rhetoric, which is distinctly sentimental.

Much of the first part of the *Philosophical Enquiry* is concerned with what is painful, what is pleasurable, and what is merely delightful. While the first two terms are straightforward enough Burke attaches to the word 'delight' a special meaning, defined as a state which is neither pleasurable nor painful. He argues that, for example, it is possible to be 'delighted' to have a serious pain diminished into a less serious one, but that one would hardly call that a movement into a state of positive pleasure. When he introduces his discussion of the sublime, arguing in a much quoted phrase that the sublime is caused by 'whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger,' he notes that 'when danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience.'¹⁷ This, argues Burke, is why we can enjoy representations of terrible events, both fictional and historical, which would fill us with terror were we to experience them ourselves. From here Burke moves into ground closely associated with the sentimental. He identifies 'three principal links' in the 'great chain of society' which are '*sympathy, imitation, and ambition*', and it is:

By the first of these passions that we enter into the concerns of others; that we are moved as they are moved, and are never suffered to be indifferent spectators of almost any thing which men can do or suffer [...] It is by this principle chiefly that poetry, painting, and other affecting arts, transfuse their passions from one breast to another, and are often capable of grafting a delight on wretchedness, misery, and death itself.¹⁸

Burke's analysis at this stage is rather a voyeuristic one, imagining that the 'delight' we feel when sympathising with the distresses of others, particularly when

¹⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 36-7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

those distresses are conveyed to us via the 'affecting arts', is little more than a species of relief at not being the person who suffers. Burke tackles this problem by introducing a social and religious dimension. 'Our Creator', he tells us, 'has designed we should be united by the bond of sympathy'. Moreover, society is not held together merely by this sympathetic bond. The 'delight' we feel at viewing a scene of misery is also mixed with some positive pain. The result of this equation is that Burke suggests society is held together by a fusion of the two principles which many Enlightenment thinkers considered mutually exclusive: altruism and selfishness. The 'delight' which we experience in witnessing the distresses of others (a necessary result of the God-given 'bond of sympathy') 'hinders us from shunning scenes of misery; and the pain we feel, prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer'. Finally, Burke insists that this entire process is 'antecedent to any reasoning', that is, that the process is entirely an emotional or irrational one.¹⁹

Burke's argument is not essentially an original one and in particular it draws extensively on the work of Locke in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* and Hume in the *Treatise of Human Nature*. It was, however, a timely and to some extent an influential addition to the growing body of philosophical literature which dealt with the concept of sympathy. It was also a work of critical theory at a time when the emerging discourse of sensibility could only benefit from a serious minded discussion of the assumptions which underpinned its apparent need to display suffering on every side. But Burke was also opening a discussion of the use of sympathy in the art of rhetoric. Here his thoughts follow on directly from Hume's with the difference that Burke asserts rather more firmly that the rhetorical project is essentially an emotional one. In the final pages of the *Philosophical Enquiry* he turns his attention to 'words' as a source of the sublime. Earlier, he had made it clear that the sublime is 'productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling'.²⁰ Here his argument turns upon the power of language

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

to raise this strong emotion. Burke argues that words produce ‘three effects in the mind of the hearer’:

The first is, the *sound*; the second, the *picture*, or representation of the thing signified by the sound; the third is, the *affection* of the soul produced by one or by both of the foregoing.²¹

The third of these effects has the greatest consequence for his theory of language. The sublime, or any of the emotions which tend towards producing the sublime, are not to be found in simple sounds or pictures. Rather, there is an interaction between those simple representations of external realities and ‘the soul’, that is, the irrational, emotional part which makes up the self. The implication of Burke’s argument is that the sublime in literature (which he calls ‘poetry and rhetoric’) is a purely internal phenomenon suggested by the sounds and pictures of words, and that we feel the sublime regardless of whether there is any actual sublime object or event brought before our view. The mechanism by which we do this is, once again, sympathy, with language the agent of the sympathetic impulse:

Poetry and rhetoric do not succeed in exact description so well as painting does; their business is to affect rather by sympathy than imitation; to display rather the effect of things on the mind of the speaker, or of others, than to present a clear idea of the things themselves.²²

So in Burke’s view that entire category of writing or speaking which came under the rhetoricians’ headings of ‘artificial’ or ‘artistic’ existed to ‘affect’, that is, to appeal to the emotions; the medium through which these emotions could be transmitted was words, and the mechanism was sympathy. Then, almost at the conclusion of the *Enquiry*, he brings together all his thoughts on words, feelings, and sympathy to argue why exactly words are such a powerful persuasive tool:

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 157.

We take an extraordinary part in the passions of others, and [...] we are easily affected and brought into sympathy by any tokens which are shewn of them; and there are no tokens which can express all the circumstances of most passions so fully as words; so that if a person speaks upon any subject, he can not only convey the subject to you, but likewise the manner in which he is himself affected by it. Certain it is, that the influence of most things on our passions is not so much from the things themselves, as from our opinions concerning them; and these again depend very much on the opinions of other men, conveyable for the most part by words only.²³

The first part of the final sentence is a quotation from the stoic philosopher Epictetus, alerting the informed reader to a wider debate over the cause of terror, the context from which the quotation is taken.²⁴ For the most part, though, this is a highly sentimentalised account of communication between feeling individuals whose opinions are formed according to their passions (feelings) and modified according to the passions of others. In Burke's rhetorical world communication, and particularly persuasion, do not merely employ the emotions as one set of tools amongst many. Rather, the emotions are the main thing which words are used to convey. The implications for the discipline of rhetoric are clear: to persuade one must pay more attention to the emotional state of the audience than to the logical proof of the argument. And if your argument involves the suffering of others that means that one must go straight for the heart.

One of the most celebrated examples of sentimental philosophy is Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* which first appeared in 1759, two years after Burke's

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²⁴ 'Men are disturbed, not by Things, but by the Principles and Notions, which they form concerning Things. Death, for instance, is not terrible, else it would have appeared so to *Socrates*. But the Terror consists in our Notion of Death, that it is terrible.' 'Enchiridion of Epictetus' in *All the Works of Epictetus, Which are now Extant*, trans. Elizabeth Carter (London: S. Richardson, A. Millar, John Rivington & R. & J. Dodsley, 1758), p. 438. This line would have been familiar to readers of Montaigne as one of his essays began: 'Men (says an ancient Greek sentence) are tormented with the opinions they have of things and not by the things themselves'. *Essays*, trans. Charles Cotton (London: 1685), I, 40. The thought was a commonplace in the middle to late eighteenth century and was quoted in Greek by Sterne on the title page of *Tristram Shandy*.

Philosophical Enquiry. Smith, to a large extent following Hume, argues that 'mutual sympathy' is the fundamental human attribute which allows people to live together in societies. It is our ability to sympathise both with other peoples' joys and with their misfortunes which allows us behave with propriety towards them. Knowing how we would feel under a particular set of circumstances causes us to respond appropriately when we find another in those circumstances. And knowing what would bring ourselves pain or joy allows us to behave in a way which promotes happiness and prevents distress in others. From these fairly simple, if eminently contestable, premises Smith's work blossoms out into a detailed analysis of society which is both a work of moral philosophy and also a sustained piece of rhetorical writing in itself.

John Rae, Smith's biographer, tells us that 'during the winter of 1748-49 he made a most successful beginning as a public lecturer by delivering a course on the then comparatively untried subject of English literature.'²⁵ It now seems clear that the title for this course was not 'English Literature' but 'Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres'. The lectures were popular and when Smith moved to Glasgow early in 1751 he took them with him and continued to present them until his resignation from that university in 1764. Rae laments that the text of these lectures were burnt shortly before Smith's death, on Smith's orders, but a copy of the lectures, made by students in 1762-63, appeared in an Aberdeenshire library sale in 1958. These lectures have subsequently been hailed as a defining moment in the development of the new rhetoric.

This claim is not without its problems. Although the considerable scholarship brought to bear on the discovery has established beyond reasonable doubt that the notes do represent lectures given by Adam Smith, the lectures were taken down from memory by at least one and, by the number of different hands discernible, probably three students, the fallibility of whose memories is evident in several places. It is not possible, therefore, to say with complete certainty that every line in the lectures, as we have them, represents the actual words spoken by Adam

²⁵ John Rae, *Life of Adam Smith* (London: Macmillan, 1895), p. 30.

Smith. However, the internal consistency of the lectures, combined with their consistency with Smith's published works, suggests a high level of fidelity. A more pressing problem concerns the claim that the lectures represent a watershed in the development of the new rhetoric. The lectures we have were delivered in 1762-3, some fourteen years into Smith's programme, and may be substantially different from those which he originally delivered. We know that others were presenting lectures on similar themes at the same time, not least Hugh Blair, whose Edinburgh lectures on rhetoric had been in progress since 1760. It is unlikely in the extreme, however, that Smith learned anything from Blair. Smith's contempt for Blair is well known; he once called him 'puffed up' and earlier remarked, when told that Blair 'frequently introduced into his sermons some of Smith's thoughts on jurisprudence [...] "He is very welcome... there is enough left"'²⁶ Blair, in turn, acknowledged his debt to Smith in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* which was published in 1783, and is discussed below. We must, therefore, conclude that Smith's lectures were an original development in the unfolding of the new rhetoric. The fact that they went unpublished at any point in the eighteenth century is more problematic but does not necessarily detract from the argument that they were influential. Much of Smith's thinking was reflected in the published works of Hugh Blair. More to the point, a generation of Scottish students were exposed to Smith's ideas, while his thoughts on rhetoric were certainly discussed by, and possibly circulated in manuscript amongst, the intelligentsia of Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Smith's *Lectures* include twenty-nine of thirty lectures (the first one is missing) which present us with a complete system of rhetoric, albeit one which is markedly different from the neo-classical systems such as those by Holmes and Ward. Howell concludes his discussion of Smith's lectures by counting the numerous ways in which he perceived Smith's rhetoric to be a new departure. Since most of these are beyond the scope of this essay, Howell's summary provides us with a useful point of entry for our examination of the sentimental aspects of Smith's

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 421, p. 33.

lectures. Howell, taking the areas of scope, style, and proof in turn, emphasises that;

Smith's rhetorical theory is remarkable for its originality, its validity, and its timeliness. It took the position that the new rhetoric must define its function as broadly communicative rather than narrowly persuasive and hence must assert jurisdiction over the forms of historical, poetical, and didactic composition no less than over the traditional kinds of oratory. It asserted that the new rhetoric must teach the eloquence of plainness, distinctness, and perspicuity. It decreed that the new rhetoric must abandon the ritualistic form of the Ciceronian oration and must adopt the simpler pattern of proposition and proof. And it required the rhetoric to turn away from the artistic proofs and the topical machinery of the old rhetoric, and to adapt itself to nonartistic arguments and direct proofs instead.²⁷

This comprehensive and accurate summary of Smith's rhetorical system is sufficient as a basis for our purposes, although Smith's widening of the scope of rhetoric will be discussed at a later point. However, Howell's analysis, and in particular the final sentence of this extract, fails to address a very important aspect of Smith's rhetoric: the role played by the idea of sympathy which, whether it belongs to pathos or logos, must surely fit into the category of artificial proof. Sympathy is a core concept in Smith's lectures and if its philosophical basis is less fully developed here than in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* this must surely have been because he could have pointed his students towards the *Theory*. Some critics have noted Howell's omission. H. Lewis Ulman, for example, goes so far as to say that Smith grounds 'his rhetorical theory in sentiment, sympathy, and character' while Vivienne Brown notes that, in Smith's view, 'the author's sentiment is conveyed by means of sympathy, a crucial concept underlying the model of successful communication'.²⁸ Sympathy is discussed in several places in the

²⁷ Howell, p. 575.

²⁸ H. Lewis Ulman, 'Adam Smith', *Eighteenth-Century British and American Rhetorics and Rhetoricians: Critical Studies and Sources*, ed. Michael G. Moran (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 213; Vivienne Brown, *Adam Smith's Discourse: Canonicity, Commerce and Conscience* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 14.

lectures, the most frequently quoted occurring in the sixth lecture, shortly before Smith's comments on the silliness of tropes and figures:

When the sentiment of the speaker is expressed in a neat, clear, plain and clever manner, and the passion or affection he is poss(ess)ed of and intends, *by sympathy*, to communicate to his hearer, is plainly and cleverly hit off, then and then only the expression has all the force and beauty that language can give it. It matters not the least whether the figures of speech are introduced or not.²⁹

The incorrect spelling of 'cleverly' reflects the student's transcription of the lecture. So too does the student's emphasis of the phrase 'by sympathy', one of only a very few phrases emphasised in the lectures. We can only guess at Adam Smith's gestures or intonation as he spoke these words. It is telling, however, that the student thought them to be significant. Here Smith is rejecting wholesale most of the baggage of the neo-classical movement in rhetoric. What matters only is that the speaker communicates effectively with his audience and to do this he must express his sentiments in such a way that the audience instantly understands and shares in them. Figures of speech work against this sympathetic exchange as their artificiality may suggest dishonesty or at the very least place barriers between the speaker and the audience. The demand for plain, honest speech is exactly what Howell is referring to when he speaks of Smith's system requiring 'the rhetoric to turn away from the artistic proofs and the topical machinery of the old rhetoric, and to adapt itself to nonartistic arguments and direct proofs instead'. But there is more to sympathy than plain language. Establishing an audience's sympathy calls for plenty of artistry. It may even call for a certain sort of orator: a man of feeling.

Traditional rhetoric included character under the heading of ethos, which was a form of artificial proof. If the audience knew that the speaker, or the person the speaker defended, was an honest man, they would be inclined to accept the speaker's statements as being true. Smith attacks the simplicity of this position

²⁹ Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J.C. Bryce and A.S. Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 25-6.

rather hilariously when he discusses Cicero's Oration in defence of Milo. Cicero, says Smith;

has arguments drawn from all the 3 topicks with regard to the Cause: That is that [Milo] had no motive to kill Clodius, that it was unsuitable to his character, and that he had no opportunity [...] He endeavours to shew that he had no motive, tho they had been squabbling and fighting every day and (he) had even declared his intention to kill him; That it was unsuitable to his character altho he had killed 20 men before; and that he had no opportunity altho we know he did kill him.³⁰

Smith felt that the assertion of good character was a nonsense when all the facts pointed against it. Just as clearly, we should not automatically assume that a speaker or writer is telling the truth on any occasion merely because they have a reputation for honesty. But curiously, given this position, Smith is at some pains to point out the importance of character in a rhetorician. More interestingly, his notion of those characteristics which make for a good rhetorician show a marked similarity to the sentimental model of the man of feeling. In his seventh lecture Smith describes the didactic writer and the historical writer before drawing a portrait of two hypothetical men, the plain man and the simple man. These two are related, but it is clear which Smith prefers. The plain man is an irritable fellow who 'gives his opinion bluntly and affirms without condescending to give any reason for his doing so'. Worse still 'he never gives way either to joy or grief' and 'compassion finds little room in his breast'. This man is immediately contrasted with the simple man who:

Appears always willing to please, when this desire does not lead him to act dissingenuously. At other times the modesty and affability of his behaviour, his being always willing to comply with customs that do'nt look affected, plainly shew the goodness of his heart [...] Contempt never enters into his mind, he is more ready to think well than meanly both of the parts and the conduct of

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

others. His own goodness of heart makes him never suspect others of dissengenuity [...] He is more given to admiration and pity, joy g(r)ief and compassion than the contrary affections, they suit well with the softness of his temper.³¹

This simple man seems remarkably close to the mid-eighteenth-century ideal of the sentimental hero. He is kind, generous, in touch with his feelings and, like many sentimental heroes, he comes with a dash of the natural state in him. Smith's example of a simple man is William Temple, who, he tells us, has 'the notion that every thing belonging to our forefathers has more simplicity than those of our times as [if] they were a more simple and honest set of men.' Smith's simple man is sentimental in many respects but, although he is 'given to admiration and pity, joy g(r)ief and compassion', he is not yet weeping profusely in the style of Henry Mackenzie's Harley, in *The Man of Feeling*. Sentimental fiction focuses on suffering and invites our sympathy for the suffering of others. In a later lecture, the sixteenth, Smith explains why suffering will always form the best subject for rhetoric and belles lettres and, in effect, for literature in general:

It is an undoubted fact that those actions affect us in the most sensible manner, and make the deepest impression, which give us a considerable degree of Pain and and uneasiness. This is the case not only with regard to our own private actions, but with those of others. Not only in our own case, missfortunate affairs chiefly affect us; but it is with the misfortunes of others that we most commonly as well as most deeply sympathise.³²

He concludes the lecture with an overtly sentimentalist statement. 'It is not surprising', he says, 'that a man of an excellent heart might incline to dwell most on the dismal side of the story.' In sentimental fiction this is indeed what happens. Time and again we are presented with characters whose inclination to dwell on 'the dismal' is used as evidence of their goodness of heart. In Smith's lectures we have,

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-8.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 85-6.

almost fully developed, a sentimental rhetoric with a central man of feeling who is capable of strongly sympathising with the grief of others and of passing on, also by means of sympathy, that grief to an audience of sympathising and sympathetic listeners. While the essence of Smith's theory of communication is sympathy, the essence of a good orator appears to be the ability to sympathise. Smith wants us to have no doubts about this. In his thirtieth lecture he discusses the man who had long been held up as the greatest rhetorician of all time. Smith agrees that Cicero is a great figure in the history of rhetoric despite having grave doubts about the usefulness of his system. More to the point though, Smith declares that Cicero's greatness as an orator stemmed from his innate sensibility: Cicero, he tells us, seems:

To have been possessed of a very high degree of Sensibility and to have been very easily depressed or elated by the misfortunes or prosperity of his friends [...] We may reasonably suppose that one of this temper would be very susceptible of all the different passions but of none more than of pity and compassion, which accordingly appears to have been that which chiefly affected him.³³

Smith's sentimental treatment of Cicero is so firmly located in the middle to late eighteenth century that we might be tempted to mistrust Smith's reading of the Ciceronian texts. This would be unfair. Smith observes that the ancients were a passionate people and he was by no means the only person to remark on this during the eighteenth century. From this commonplace it is easy for Smith to discover the feeling man in Cicero and although this is a reading heavily slanted towards Smith's thesis on the importance of sympathy it is certainly not an inaccurate one as far as it goes. We must also remember who Smith was addressing and when. These lectures were delivered to a predominantly young audience at a time when sensibility was at the height of fashion. Perhaps Smith was demonstrating his sympathy with the concerns of his audience when he presented the old Roman as being a man of the most modern sensibility. This

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

would not have been a cynical gesture. Smith's philosophy of rhetoric, based on the doctrine of sympathy, is very much in tune with his system of moral philosophy as expressed in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith was able to present his system of rhetoric as new, exciting, and sentimental because that is exactly what it was.

Smith's works on rhetoric were not published during his lifetime, or even during the eighteenth century. We can be sure, however, that his ideas were extremely influential, not least because the author of the most popular rhetorical textbook of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries based his work in large part on Smith's lectures. Hugh Blair published his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* in 1783, a subject on which he had been lecturing at Edinburgh for the preceding twenty-four years. Blair had attended Smith's lectures in Edinburgh and when he began lecturing on the subject himself in 1759 he was aware that he was following in Smith's footsteps. Accordingly, there was much in his lectures which drew on Smith as well as from many other rhetoricians. Indeed, Adam Potkay has called Blair's work 'one of the great commonplace books of the eighteenth century'.³⁴ This is no overstatement. Blair managed to reproduce the thinking of many rhetoricians and philosophers, both ancient and modern, and in so doing presented the world with a compendious account of both the history and practice of rhetoric. There are very few original ideas to be found in Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, a fact which Blair cheerfully admits to in his footnotes. So, for example, Blair's third and fourth lectures, on criticism and the sublime, borrow extensively from Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*. The second lecture, on taste, refers also to Burke but also owes much to Hume's essay 'On the Standard of Taste'. Lectures six, seven, and eight virtually reprint Smith's *Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages* in its entirety. Not surprisingly Blair acknowledges this; the essay, published in 1761, was the only part of Smith's lectures on rhetoric to be published during his lifetime. Elsewhere, Blair is vaguer on his debt to Smith. At one point he admits to having borrowed a few ideas on simplicity in style from him. He tells us that

³⁴ Potkay, *Fate of Eloquence*, p. 45n.

On this head, of the general characters of style, particularly the plain and the simple, and the characters of those English authors who are classed under them, in this and the following lecture, several ideas have been taken from a manuscript treatise on rhetoric, part of which was shown to me many years ago by the learned and ingenious author, Dr. Adam Smith.³⁵

As Rae put it in 1895, 'many of Smith's friends considered this acknowledgement far from adequate'.³⁶ With the publication of Smith's lectures in 1963 we can now see that they were right. Blair's lectures, though containing additional material, are based almost entirely on Smith's original plan. Although he refused to publish his own work on the subject Smith was, through Blair, to become one of the most significant contributors to the study of rhetoric in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Because of Blair's reliance on Smith and others it is unnecessary here to look into his rhetorical system too deeply, other than to say that Blair's system of rhetoric is wider even than Smith's. Blair intends rhetoric and the belles lettres to represent not merely spoken oratory, nor even all forms of persuasive discourse, but to encompass all forms of literature. Rather than examine this extremely broad system in its entirety it is intended here only to look at a few of Blair's pronouncements on sympathy and feeling, subjects allied to sentimentalism. Blair follows Smith closely in arguing that a good orator or persuasive writer must be a man of feeling. 'Without possessing the virtuous affections in a strong degree,' Blair asserts, 'no man can attain eminence in the sublime parts of eloquence. He must feel what a good man feels, if he expects greatly to move or to interest mankind.'³⁷ In this Blair says no more than Smith had done, although to his readers this may have appeared as a somewhat novel as well as a fashionably sentimental view of the role of the orator. Blair goes further than this in his next

³⁵ Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 2 vols (London: W. Strahan and Thomas Cadell, 1783), I, p. 381.

³⁶ Rae, *Life of Adam Smith*, p. 33.

³⁷ Blair, *Lectures*, I, p. 13.

lecture. Here it is not merely the author who must 'feel what a good man feels'. A good reader must also share this attribute. Blair's analysis owes something to the views of David Hume, in his essay 'On the Standard of Taste', but where Hume saw reason as the most important prerequisite for the development of good taste, Blair feels compelled to add emotion and a feeling heart to the equation. Blair writes:

I must be allowed to add, that as a sound head, so likewise a good heart, is a very material requisite to just Taste. The moral beauties are not only in themselves superior to all others, but they exert an influence, either more near or more remote, on a great variety of other objects of Taste. Wherever the affections, characters, or actions of men are concerned [...] there can be neither any just or affecting description of them, nor any thorough feeling of the beauty of that description, without our possessing the virtuous affections. He whose heart is indelicate or hard, he who has no admiration of what is truly noble or praiseworthy, nor the proper sympathetic sense of what is soft and tender, must have a very imperfect relish of the highest beauties of eloquence and poetry.³⁸

Blair then returns to his discussion of taste, based on Hume, for a further ten pages before concluding with the following uncompromising words:

Just reasonings on the subject will correct the caprice of unenlightened Taste, and establish principles for judging of what deserves praise. But, at the same time, these reasonings appeal always, in the last resort, to feeling [...] It is from consulting our own imagination and heart and from attending to the feelings of others, that any principles are formed which acquire authority in matters of Taste.³⁹

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-2.

These are large claims. Blair is arguing that all critical judgements must fundamentally be based on our emotional engagement with a text while the text itself must be driven by its author's emotions. In the sympathetic exchange which Blair envisions the point of contact between text and reader, or orator and audience, must be a highly charged emotional experience. While reason is there it is always in danger of being over-ridden entirely by emotion, indeed, the implication is that a good writer or orator operates by doing exactly that while a good reader seeks to have his or her reason overthrown by emotion. The emotions described are not the harsher variety. Blair is not arguing that texts should be approached with anger or even particularly with passion. The feelings which are specified, and it is significant that Blair uses the word 'feeling' rather than 'passion' or 'emotion', are 'admiration of what is truly noble or praiseworthy' combined with a 'proper sympathetic sense of what is soft and tender'. These, above all, are the sentimental virtues extolled in numerous novels and poems of the later eighteenth century. Blair demands that both producers and consumers of literature approach their task with proper sensibility. The emotionally charged moment when the text is heard or read becomes, in Blair's system of rhetoric and literary appreciation, a supremely sentimental moment.

Chapter 2

The Rhetoric of Sensibility

Chapter One looked at sentimentalism in the development of new approaches to rhetoric in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It therefore focused on theory. This second chapter will look more closely at the practice of sentimental rhetoric, focusing on a number of distinct and recognisable rhetorical techniques used by practitioners of the rhetoric of sensibility. The examples chosen come from poems and novels as well as from political tracts and reports of speeches. In the main, however, they are deliberately chosen as not being part of the debate over slavery and the slave trade, the debate which will be examined in depth in the main part of this dissertation.

The classical five-fold division of rhetoric into invention, arrangement, and so on, combined with the further sub-division of those faculties into more and more minute and specific categories suited ancient, medieval and renaissance rhetoricians. In the eighteenth century, however, its usefulness as a method of organising rhetorical theory was starting to be challenged, while its popularity began to decline. Likewise, modern literary theorists see little other than historical interest in making use of the ancient rhetorical taxonomy. For these reasons we shall not try to make sentimental rhetoric fit exactly into any classical or modern system of rhetoric. Instead, with a nod in the direction of Wilbur Howell's thoughts on the new rhetoric, discussed in the preceding chapter, we shall use a simpler tripartite system of classification.

In the first place we shall look at the scope of sentimental rhetoric, examining its place in the burgeoning philanthropic ethos of the late eighteenth century, but also asking to whom it might have been addressed. We shall then consider the forms of proof used by sentimental persuaders, looking at the role of pathos, the term by which eighteenth-century commentators recognised sentimental rhetoric, and discussing a number of types of argument which were either used with particular

success by sentimentalists or which appear to have been newly invented. Finally we shall examine style and arrangement in sentimental rhetoric, arguing that while practitioners of the rhetoric of sensibility preferred, but were by no means confined to, the low or middle style and avoided excessively figurative language or arbitrarily structured arguments, they did nonetheless create a uniquely sentimental tone which, though perhaps the most difficult characteristic of sentimental rhetoric to define, is probably the easiest to recognise.

Scope

The first of Wilbur Howell's issues relating to the new rhetoric 'concerned the question whether rhetoric should continue to limit itself to persuasive popular discourse' or widen its interests to literature in general to include 'even the forms of poetry'. Next, Howell considered whether rhetoric should 'continue to limit itself to the field of artistic proof prescribed by classical theory', in effect to the lists of topics and commonplaces, or should widen its scope in this respect.¹ These questions address the scope of the new rhetoric in terms of rhetoric's ability to be transformed into a discipline relevant in a changing world. In many ways they are pedagogical questions and, as we have seen, rhetoricians such as Adam Smith were keen to extend the discipline of rhetoric as it was taught in universities to include belle lettres. This part of rhetoric includes literary criticism and critical theory, subjects now normally taught under the heading of English Literature.

The rhetoric of sensibility, however, was a form of persuasion, not a study of rhetoric, and had little to do with pedagogical practice. Nor did it have a distinct identity, either in the eighteenth century or later. It was merely a tendency within the many competing rhetorics which have come to be known as the 'new rhetoric'. The scope of sentimental rhetoric is therefore difficult to discuss in the terms set out by Howell since those terms refer to a much wider debate over the use and

¹ Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 441-7, *passim*.

scope of rhetoric. However, in response to Howell's points we can say that in the first case sentimental rhetoric had much to do with literature in general, being heavily influenced in particular by sentimental novels and poetry. In the second case those who adopted or created sentimental arguments or techniques to persuade deviated very considerably from 'the field of artistic proof prescribed by classical theory'. As we shall shortly see, there are a number of rhetorical proofs which are either unique to the rhetoric of sensibility, or which are used in a very distinctive manner by sentimental persuaders.

However, it is useful to ask to which arguments or debates sentimental rhetoric could usefully be extended and who persuaders thought might be swayed by sentimental arguments. Here we can note that the scope of sentimental rhetoric is paradoxically both very broad and very narrow. It is narrow because, relying on invoking sympathy for suffering, it is applicable only to arguments which involve a victim. It is broad because most political and judicial questions potentially or actually involve winners and losers. The sentimental rhetorician will normally seek out exceptional instances of suffering and emphasise them in order to gain the reader or hearer's sympathy. In some cases the instances of suffering appear somewhat synthetic, bogus even. But in all cases victims will be found and their sufferings delineated. In scope, then, this mode of rhetoric is potentially very broad, if not indefinitely extendible.

Sentimental rhetoric focused on the emotional or physical response of victims. For this reason it was often applied to causes which in the eighteenth century would have been described as benevolent or philanthropic. Sensibility, though a predominantly literary phenomenon, is a mode of writing in which the reader's sympathy is engaged in order that the reader will enjoy the book, play or poem the more. Philanthropy, similarly, depends on engaging the sympathy of the public in order that they may be moved to alleviate with practical help the suffering which is presented before them. Furthermore, the growth of sensibility as a popular literary phenomenon and philanthropy as a mass social force are seemingly related, if only because they occurred at roughly the same time. This may be a coincidence but is

more likely to reflect the fact that citizens of an increasingly wealthy and stable society, such as that of late-eighteenth-century Britain, have more leisure to reflect on the sufferings of others, a smaller likelihood of encountering those sufferings, and a greater economic capacity to relieve suffering when they encounter it. In the same way that 'conduct books' prescribed correct forms of social behaviour for the middle and upper classes, much philanthropic sentimental literature suggested correct forms of economic behaviour for the wealthy.²

While it is true that much sentimental literature deals with economic misfortune the sufferings of the body are emphasised too, far more in the late eighteenth century than in any earlier period. Philanthropy is in one of its forms a reaction against physical violence. Some violence is direct: the beating of slaves, the flogging of prisoners and the kicking of dogs and horses are just a few of the common forms of violence which outraged eighteenth-century philanthropists. It is arguable that in increasingly peaceful and prosperous eighteenth-century England a growing majority of the population became psychologically conditioned to regard any sort of violence with abhorrence.³ If this is true then the realisation that, in the case of slavery, a major branch of the national trade was engaged in systematic torture and violence is likely to have produced psychologically deep-seated feelings of shame and repugnance. Other forms of violence, such as starvation due to poverty, are no less painful to the victim. The person who allowed starvation to persist when it was within their means to relieve it is likely to have been viewed with as much abhorrence as the ostler who systematically mistreated his horses. That more and more violent 'crimes' could have been perceived where previously there had only been misdemeanours, or even usual practice, is a reflection on the increasing sensibility of British people, insofar as sensibility means awareness of the feelings of others.

² For a clear discussion of this topic see; Gillian Skinner, *Sensibility and Economics in the Novel, 1740-1800: the Price of a Tear* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

³ An argument made by Norbert Elias in *The Civilizing Process*, 2 vols, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978). Elias's argument covers the whole of Europe in the early-modern and modern periods and thus tends to generalise about complex social and psychological developments in communities with very different histories.

The cult of 'virtue in distress' which ran through most sentimental writings was an expression of this growing awareness. Readers appear to have increasingly lost their desire to cause distress in enemies while at the same time facing less distress themselves. Accordingly, literary representations of distressed victims increased in their power to arouse sympathy, whether the sufferers were victims of male power, of economic misfortune or of slave traders. As this power to move grew in importance it became increasingly effective for orators and political writers to seek to manipulate their audiences' sympathies for the victims of violence and oppression. Indeed, so powerful was the rhetoric of sympathy and sensibility in this period that it became useful for some persuaders to portray aggressors as victims, and to ask audiences to shed a sympathetic tear over the fate of those who had never suffered at all. While cynical applications of the rhetoric of sensibility were common enough in the later eighteenth century, in most cases they were there only because the advocates of philanthropy had already managed to seize the moral high ground. They did this largely through the use of sentimental rhetoric and so it was only natural that their opponents would also want to make use of this powerful weapon. Thus the target audience for sentimental rhetoric was as broad as the range of issues on which that rhetoric was brought to bear, although in reality those sentimental writers who opposed philanthropic projects usually failed to be convincing. Sentimental rhetoric, therefore, was in most cases an agent of philanthropy, and its audience, naturally enough, the philanthropic.

The philanthropic audience was an extremely diverse group of people ranging from professional politicians such as William Wilberforce to fourteen year-old schoolgirls like Harriet Falconar who in 1788 produced, with her seventeen year-old sister Maria, a book of sentimental poems opposing slavery. It was a politically diverse group as well. Evangelical Christians such as Wilberforce tended to be conservative on many social issues while some of the radicals of the late century, Mary Wollstonecraft being a famous example, launched stinging attacks on sentimentalism while themselves making use of the rhetoric of sensibility. The scope of sentimental rhetoric was therefore potentially very broad. It could appeal to political radicals and conservatives, to the young and to the old and, because it

could work to a large extent without theory, to the educated and to the ignorant. It was a suitable mode to be employed whenever there was a victim who was in need of sympathy. For this reason it quickly became a branch of rhetoric associated with the burgeoning philanthropic movements of the middle to late eighteenth century.

Proof

Classical rhetoricians divided proof into two sorts, artificial and inartificial. Inartificial proofs were those which arose naturally and which could not easily be disputed. If in support of his argument that Caesar was dead an orator produced the lifeless body of Caesar, his argument had been won by the production of inartificial proof. The use of this sort of proof in rhetoric was clear enough and so the place of inartificial proof was not under dispute in the eighteenth century. What were under discussion were artificial proofs, sometimes known as artistic proofs, in which the orator constructed an argument according to the rules of logic, ethics, or pathos. In his discussion of this debate Wilbur Howell looks almost exclusively at logical proofs while ignoring proofs which were ethical or derived from pathos. Eighteenth-century rhetoricians, Howell notes, asked ‘whether the form of rhetorical proof should be described as fundamentally enthymematic [or] fundamentally inductive’ and ‘whether rhetoric should deal only in probabilities, or whether it [was] also its responsibility to achieve as full a measure of proof as the situation allow[ed]’.⁴ These were important questions, particularly for forensic rhetoricians (lawyers), but were of less importance to those who used sensibility to persuade in the political or social arena. The sorts of proofs advanced in sentimental rhetoric were less likely to be logical and more likely to belong to the categories of pathos and ethos.

In particular, rhetorical sensibility is strongly associated with the classical form of artificial proof known as pathos. Originally pathos applied to all forms of feeling.

⁴ Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic*, pp. 441-7, *passim*.

'The emotions', argued Aristotle, 'are those things through which, by undergoing change, people come to differ in their judgements and which are accompanied by pain and pleasure, for example, anger, pity, fear, and other such things and their opposites.'⁵ Aristotle's famous discussion of pathos, generally recognised as the earliest systematic discussion of human psychology, is not merely a discussion of how to influence the emotions of an audience but is also a general theory of human emotion. In the late-seventeenth century a narrower definition of pathos emerged in which the word came to represent 'that quality in speech, writing, music, or artistic representation [...] which excites a feeling of pity or sadness; power of stirring tender or melancholy emotion'.⁶ This usage became the dominant one in the eighteenth century, and the one used exclusively by sentimental writers. Most eighteenth-century commentators remarked on the pathos of a piece of writing when they recognised its sentimental qualities, regardless of whether the sentimentalism displayed bore anything other than a fleeting resemblance to pathos as understood by classical rhetoricians.

Although concerned with all of the emotions, pathos in classical rhetoric nonetheless dealt with pity and suffering as part of that broad project and the classical rhetoricians were clear that if an audience could be brought to sympathise with suffering then this was a powerful persuasive tool. 'The hearer suffers along with the pathetic speaker,' Aristotle tells us, 'even if what he says amounts to nothing'.⁷ Cicero takes a similar line when he notes that 'Compassion is awakened if the hearer can be brought to apply to his own adversities, whether endured or only apprehended, the lamentations uttered over someone else'.⁸ Here the classical rhetoricians showed the way for sentimental rhetoricians. In this respect the rhetoric of sensibility could be viewed as merely an eighteenth-century habit of according pathos, in particular the sympathetic part of pathos, a privileged position over other forms of rhetorical proof. But this is not quite sufficient as there were

⁵ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, trans. George A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 121.

⁶ OED2.

⁷ Aristotle, *Of Rhetoric*, p. 235.

⁸ Cicero, *De Oratore*, with an English translation by E.W. Sutton and H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1942) II, lii, 211.

many arguments from ethos which were as sentimental as those from pathos. Moreover, there were also a number of rhetorical strategies, mostly forms of proof, which were either new or unique to sentimental persuasion or which were used with particular success by sentimentalists. Five such techniques I suggest could be named as: Sentimental Argument, The Sentimental Parable, The Establishment of a Sentimental Hero, Sentimental Diversion and The Emotional Subversion of the Intellect. We shall here consider each of these in turn.

Sentimental Arguments

Of these five strategies three; the sentimental parable, diversion, and the emotional subversion of the intellect, are allied to the classical notion of pathos, while the establishment of the sentimental hero is an argument from ethos. Sentimental arguments would appear to belong to logos, although they are not necessarily logical arguments, derived from deductive rather than inductive reasoning. Indeed, sentimental arguments sometimes entirely replace reason with emotion and substitute evidence with intuition. In the main, however, sentimental arguments are those which refer to sentimentalist theories, particularly, those arguments which depend on ideas of mutual sympathy to provide a philosophical grounding for their argument. Often these arguments are sentimental in tone, but this is not necessarily the case. The opening passage of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* for instance, is both an excellent example of sentimental argument and a key text in the development of a sentimental philosophy. The book begins:

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when either we see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for

this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane, though they perhaps may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it.⁹

Smith's opening paragraph is largely concerned with sorrow and misery, central preoccupations of sentimentalists. He commences, however, with a refutation of the doctrine that human beings, in the state of nature, are fundamentally self-interested. He does not attempt to disprove this, indeed, he makes a point of dismissing any discussion of the point entirely: 'there are evidently some principles' he asserts and later he talks of 'a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it'. For a work of philosophy to introduce as its fundamental premise an assertion which the writer considers to be self-evident is dangerous indeed. Smith is not trying to demonstrate the existence of a fundamental human characteristic. Rather he is identifying and reaching out to his ideal reader—the man or woman of sensibility. Such a reader is already convinced that his or her personal response to the joy or misery of others is a basic ordering principle in their life. This reader reads on to discover how the structure of society follows from this principle, not to be convinced from first principles that it does. Smith rapidly confirms that he is speaking to an audience of the converted by his move, in the second sentence, to the inclusive 'we' rather than the objective 'man'. The inference is that if the reader takes issue with the first sentence he or she might as well stop reading there. This is typical of sentimental argument which often follows the pattern: 'there is suffering and there is compassion. We who are compassionate must alleviate suffering. You, who are not compassionate are lacking a fundamental human characteristic and are therefore not being addressed.'

This passage from Smith concludes with a comparison between one who feels 'with the most exquisite sensibility' and 'the greatest ruffian'. In these two extremes Smith shows who he believes to be the best and the worst members of

⁹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 9.

society but both, he argues, feel compassion to some extent, a viewpoint which we can imagine being refuted by many. Smith is addressing his comments to that section of the reading public which found it possible to see a heart of gold in even 'the most hardened violator of the laws of society'. This desire to find the ability to sympathise everywhere is particularly characteristic of sentimental argument, and it appears over and over in various forms. In the drive to prove that a sympathetic heart is common to all human beings, robbers and the robbed, slaves and slave-drivers, are all shown to possess the sympathetic instinct. But these arguments revolve around one common theme: the good act on their sympathies while the bad suppress them. It is a simple theme and yet it is the most prevalent sentimental argument of them all.

Another common sentimental argument, which was also subject to a great deal of variation, maintains as a basic tenet that all human beings experience pain and misery in the same way. By sentimental and philanthropic writers and orators (and in later periods by radicals and socialists) this axiom was used to *advance* the argument that equality of feeling proves the equal status of all human beings. This argument was not a new one in the eighteenth century. Indeed, it was familiar, then as now, through its expression in *The Merchant of Venice*, at a point where Shylock argues;

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?¹⁰

The association of this argument with race was an early one and in the eighteenth century it was particularly useful to anti-slavery campaigners, who faced a pro-slavery lobby which frequently denied the humanity of Africans. The eighteenth

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, III, i.

century, however, saw a distinct pushing forwards of the bounds of benevolence and a renegotiation of what constituted humanity. As a result this argument also began to be deployed by those concerned with children, the poor and even animals. William Cowper, who wrote poems opposing slavery, was also a prolific writer of anthropomorphic verse concerned with the feelings of animals and even plants. Thomas Day, whose anti-slavery poem *The Dying Negro* is discussed at length in Chapter Three, was also a pioneering children's writer and a campaigner for the better treatment of horses. These, and other sentimental writers, maintained that since all people (and sometimes animals) felt in the same way they should be treated in the same way.

The Sentimental Parable

The sentimental parable, like the biblical parable on which it is based, is a short story which contains a moral and which is usually interpolated into a larger narrative. As such it is closely related to the classical rhetorical notion of paradigm, or example. Aristotle argued that 'if one does not have a supply of enthymemes, one should use paradigms as demonstration'.¹¹ He noted that there were two forms of paradigm: historical paradigms and fables, the former factual and the latter fictional. A paradigm can be used to illustrate any kind of situation but the parable is more concerned, as is most sentimental rhetoric, with ethical or moral situations. The sentimental parable invariably draws attention to some form of suffering and always draws a benevolent or philanthropic moral from the story it tells. (The biblical parable, by contrast, is more concerned with matters of faith.) The sentimental parable often works by drawing attention to an individual tale of suffering in which the fate of a single individual is recounted in moving language as an example of the suffering which afflicts a multitude. Statistics can confuse while a broad canvas might overpower the reader's sensibilities. A human story on a human scale is more likely to move, and more likely to persuade those who are moved.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Of Rhetoric*, p. 181.

Many good examples of sentimental parables are provided by Laurence Sterne in his collection of sermons, a collection which Ignatius Sancho admired because he thought that they ‘inculcate practical duties, and paint brotherly love—and the true Christian charities in such beauteous glowing colours—that one cannot help wishing to feed the hungry—cloathe the naked, &c. &c.’¹² Sancho probably had ‘Philanthropy Recommended’ in mind, a sermon in which Sterne retells the familiar Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan in a way which invites us to imagine the exact thoughts and feelings of the benevolent Samaritan. Sterne’s sermon begins with a sentimental argument which is clearly modelled on the opening passage of Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, published the preceding year:

There is something in our nature which engages us to take part in every accident to which man is subject, [...] from a certain generosity and tenderness of nature which disposes us for compassion, abstracted from all considerations of self: so that without any observable act of the will, we suffer with the unfortunate, and feel a weight upon our spirits we know not why, on seeing the most common instances of their distress.¹³

Here again we see the fundamental assertion that human beings are naturally sympathetic creatures being developed to show that they are also necessarily altruistic. Again we find that it is distress that is being discussed and again we find the use of the inclusive ‘we’, here more appropriately than in the Smith passage, as Sterne’s sermon is self-consciously a rhetorical work and not, supposedly, a work of dispassionate philosophical enquiry. Sterne in this sermon retells the familiar story of the Good Samaritan which itself could be taken for the prototype of the sentimental parable. ‘A certain *man*’ we may recall, ‘went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded *him*, and departed, leaving *him* half dead’. This naked and injured man is passed

¹² *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho* (1782), ed. Vincent Carretta (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 83.

¹³ Laurence Sterne, ‘Philanthropy Recommended’, *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick* (1760), 2 vols (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1927), I, pp. 25-36, pp. 27-8.

first by a priest and next by a Levite, his compatriot, both of whom leave him for dead. Finally, an inhabitant of Samaria, a people who were sworn enemies of the Jews, passes by the man 'and when he saw him, he had compassion *on him*', dressing his wounds and putting him up at an inn. 'Go, and do thou likewise', says Christ to the lawyer who had prompted the parable with his question, 'who is my neighbour?'¹⁴

This parable provides a source of rich pickings for the sentimental rhetorician. It dwells on the sufferings of another. It allows the humane to be shocked at the inhumanity of the Levite and the priest: 'Merciful GOD!' exclaims Sterne, 'that a teacher of thy religion should ever want humanity'.¹⁵ Finally, it invites the reader or listener to place themselves in the role of the Samaritan, that is, it invokes an emotional response in the reader and then provides three characters only one of whom the emotionally involved reader can possibly identify with. But the parable form itself is hugely appealing to sentimental writers in that it is particularly suited to reducing to human terms vast and complex problems. It is too much to write of the sufferings of millions; sentimentalists prefer to write of the suffering of one representative of those millions. In this way a 'personal' connection, a sympathetic identification, is established between the reader and the sufferer which can be exploited by the narrator without the need to discuss complex social, economic, or political questions. For many sentimental persuaders this was an important consideration. Women, young people, and many men who were not part of the metropolitan political elite, sometimes had a shaky grasp of political questions. Many women who were actively discouraged from taking too close an interest in the detail of political questions were at the same time keen readers of sentimental novels and poetry. Yet these people, as wives, children, and friends of the powerful had their influence and were worth persuading. Even members of the Houses of Lords and Commons, husbands and fathers themselves, might not be immune to a plaintive story narrated by a suffering woman or child.

¹⁴ Luke, 10: 25-37.

¹⁵ Sterne, 'Philanthropy Recommended', p. 28.

Sterne was a master of the sentimental parable. Many of the 'digressions' of both *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* fall into this category. In one of the best known of these the sufferings of all young lovers denied the chance to marry the person of their choice are encapsulated in the story of Maria, 'so quick-witted and amiable a maid' who had gone mad after having 'her Banns forbid, by the intrigues of the curate of the parish'.¹⁶ The curate is here analogous to the priest who passes the Levite by in the Biblical story of the Good Samaritan, at least in so far as his intriguing is clearly not of the benevolent sort. While the Anglican Sterne may be making a jibe at the Catholic clergy it is more likely that he opposes hypocrisy by members of the priesthood of any denomination. In any case, Maria's pathetic condition becomes in itself an object of concern for the narrator: 'if ever I felt the full force of an honest heart-ache', he tells us, 'it was the moment I saw her.'

Sterne returns to Maria in *A Sentimental Journey*. Here the moral turns more closely on his narrator Yorick's personal response to Maria's tragedy in order to make an important theological point. His tears and 'indescribable emotions' tell him that 'I am positive I have a soul; nor can all the books with which materialists have pester'd the world ever convince me of the contrary'.¹⁷ It is the hallmark of the sentimental parable to extrapolate a large public moral from a small personal event. From this simple emotional response to an individual instance of suffering Sterne is able to re-affirm the Christian doctrine of the soul, and to attack the materialists and atheists who oppose it. The story of Maria was one of the most famous sentimental parables of its time inspiring widespread comment and imitation as well as a series of illustrations by the painter Joseph Wright of Derby. [Figure 3] Its power to attract the public's interest in a major theological and philosophical question derives in part from existing public interest in that question

¹⁶ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-67), ed. Graham Petrie (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 600.

¹⁷ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), ed. Ian Jack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 114.

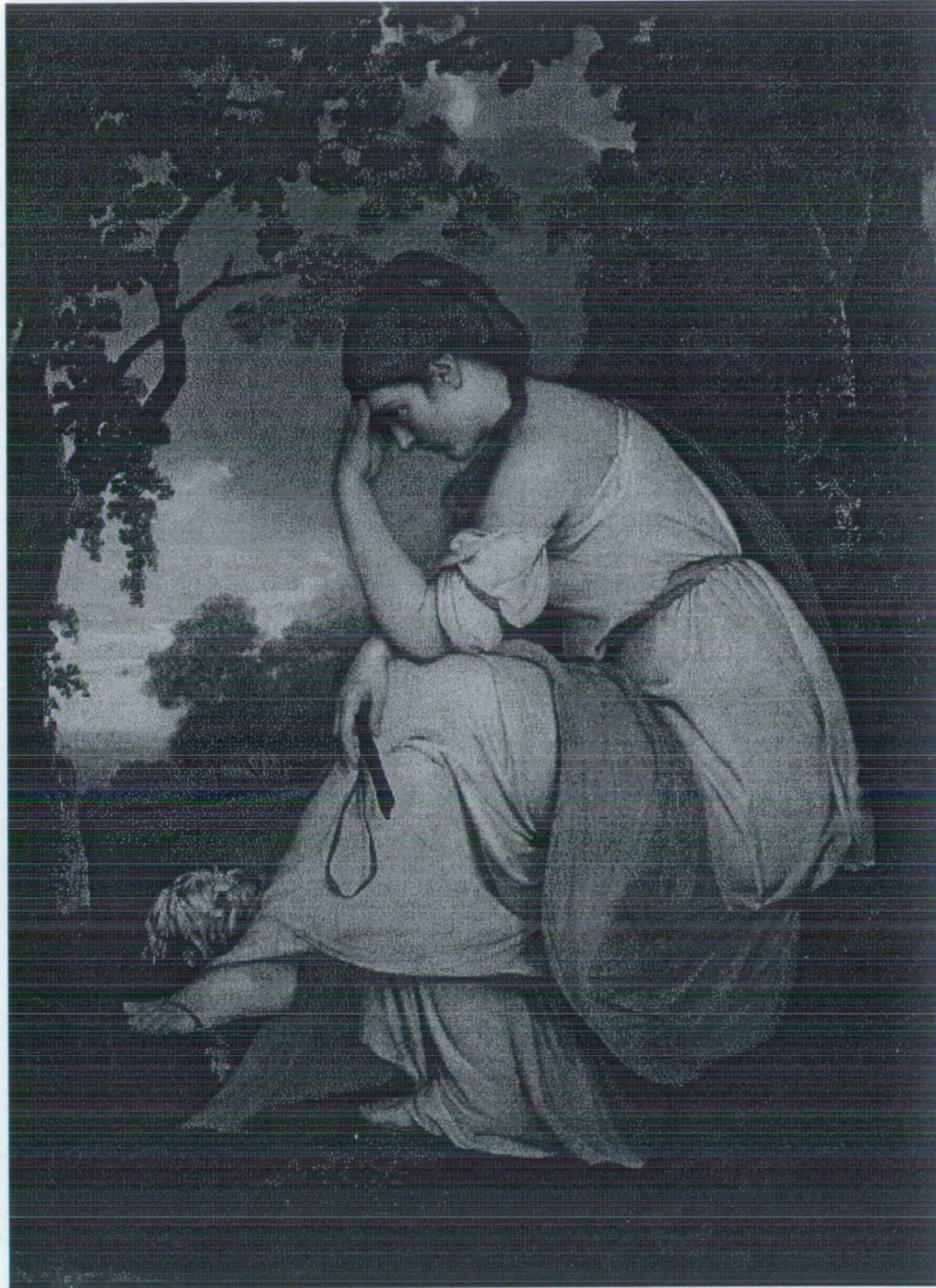


Figure 3

Joseph Wright of Derby, *Maria*, from *Sterne* (1781)

but also from the way the story combines a tale of individual suffering with a strong hint as to the correct emotional and theological response. Sterne's treatment of the Maria story does contain complexities which are not present in the majority of sentimental parables. Sterne's narrator, Yorick, is far from reliable while there is something rather lubricious about his interest in Maria. However, the story of Maria remains a good example of a powerful sentimental parable as do many of Sterne's sermons and many of the 'digressions' in his novels.

Establishment of a Sentimental Hero

In classical rhetoric ethos involved proofs which established either the character of the person under question or the character of the person making the oration. The former was of use in forensic and epideictic rhetoric (respectively, legal rhetoric and the rhetoric of praise or blame). The latter was applicable to all orations as it was important that the audience viewed the orator as a man of good character. In sentimental rhetoric, as in most sentimental fiction, the narrator usually seeks to establish his or her credentials as a sincere man or woman of feeling and this in itself is a form of ethos. But in sentimental rhetoric we also find a peculiar form of ethical argument in which a person under discussion is portrayed, and often praised, as a sentimental hero or, less frequently in political debate, as a sentimental heroine. That person may be someone accused of some form of bad behaviour, often debt-related, but they are far more likely to be a victim of someone else's actions. Occasionally, though, the sentimental hero is not a victim at all. In these cases he or she is likely to be a benefactor. In either case, their superior sensibility is highlighted, their suffering or their joy at relieving suffering is dwelt on, and the audience is asked, directly or indirectly, to share in their feelings.

The sentimental hero or heroine is a figure rather directly culled from the pages of the sentimental novel. Numerous examples could be named: Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe*, Sterne's *Uncle Toby*, and Mackenzie's *Mr. Harley—the Man of Feeling*—being amongst the most celebrated. These, and others like them, have in

common their emotional approach to their world. Their authors use their emotionality to create an emotional response in the reader, a technique which works well for political persuaders as well. Rhetoricians normally have a specific course of action which they want their reader to follow or a particular wrong which they would like the reader to condemn. For this reason sentimental heroes identified in political discourse almost invariably fall into one of two camps. The first sort suffers from a wrong which the reader or listener is urged to condemn while the second follows a course of action which the reader is invited to follow themselves.

Wronged sentimental heroes and heroines are plentiful in literature and their sorrows frequently occupy entire novels. More often than not these are heroines, usually young girls facing, as does Clarissa Harlowe, a bad marriage or struggling to cope, like Sidney Bidulph in Frances Sheridan's novel, with the consequences of a bad marriage. Male examples also exist and one of the most characteristic is Dr. Primrose in Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Primrose faces a series of misfortunes in which his livelihood, family, and freedom are progressively taken away from him. He confronts each disaster with a mixture of fortitude and tears, with the tears usually gaining the upper hand. Close to the end of the novel Primrose lies in gaol, with the one hope remaining that his son George might return from overseas to save him. George is finally brought into the prison, but wounded, mortally it seems, and bound with chains. 'I tried to restrain my passions for a few minutes in silence,' says Primrose, 'but I thought I should have died with the effort—"O my boy, my heart weeps to behold thee thus, and I cannot, cannot help it."' George exhorts his father to submit to the will of God and Primrose then chooses to preach a sermon to his fellow prisoners. He begins by addressing himself to 'my friends, my children, and fellow sufferers'.¹⁸ His sermon, a piece of formal public speaking, is itself an example of sentimental rhetoric and demonstrates how representations of sentimental arguments in literary texts could operate as a pedagogical tool, instructing readers in how to appreciate sentimental

¹⁸ Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), ed. Stephen Coote (London: Penguin, 1982), pp. 171-73.

rhetoric regardless of whether they had come across it in literary or political writing.

Primrose is also a Christian hero who, much like the Biblical character Job, refuses to despair of eventual salvation despite all the torments Heaven can send and is ultimately rewarded in this world as well as in the next. While his repeated lamentations and fits of weeping seem at first sight to signal that at many points he is close to despair, this is not the case. Rather, his emotional response to his calamities shows that he is a man of refined sensibilities and it is intended to create a similar emotional response in the reader. Furthermore, it suggests that shedding open tears is at least a coping strategy in adversity, and may be a source of positive enjoyment. Mrs Primrose, earlier in the novel, 'felt a pleasing distress, and wept' and by this method recovered her love for her daughter.¹⁹ Primrose is a sentimental hero whose sufferings are held up to excite, through sympathy, the compassion of the reader. His tears show that he is human while his faith is that of an ideal Christian. As such he is a model for many long-suffering sentimental heroes who appear in political rhetoric as the victims of real abuses in the real world.

The other sort of sentimental hero does not suffer himself (and he is usually male) but rather relieves suffering, in most cases through the widespread disbursement of alms. This character type is quick to discover instances of suffering and just as quick to sympathetically feel for the victims of suffering. He is necessarily possessed of a fortune, and whether this was inherited or earned he is likely to live in a manner which is rich but not gaudy. A good example is Sir George Ellison, the eponymous hero of Sarah Scott's novel, for whom no case of distress is small enough to go unrelieved. Sir George busies himself around his parish (and before that around his Caribbean plantation) ensuring that the poor (and before them the slaves) are well-fed, well-housed, well-clothed, and well treated. In return the poor (and the slaves) promise to live lives marked by morality and industry. Sir George does not stop here, however. He involves himself in a large number of

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

other broadly philanthropic issues ranging from prison reform to the disadvantages of over-tight corsetry. Throughout he relieves suffering wherever his compassion is excited. Sir George, like many benevolent and sentimental heroes, is too good to be true, a point which Scott concedes in the preface to her book but which she turns to her advantage. 'If any one should object, that Sir George Ellison is too good to have existed any where but in imagination', she argues, 'I must intreat my censurer will, before he determines this point, endeavour to equal the virtue of Sir George'.²⁰ This is a rhetorical strategy. Sir George is in many ways the ideal sentimental hero. The ideal sentimental reader, Scott clearly hopes, will be persuaded by his example to perform their own acts of sentimental heroism.

Sentimental Diversion

Sentimental diversion occurs when the sufferings of one person or group of people are invoked in order to divert attention away from the sufferings of another. It is particularly effective when used in a sentimental style or when combined with one of the other techniques of sentimental rhetoric. One sentimental parable might be countered by another or the trials or benevolence of a sentimental hero might be outdone by the fate or largesse of another. While the effort to engage the sympathies of the audience was visible on both sides of an argument, the diversionary technique was used almost exclusively by conservative writers hoping to divert attention away from the issue in hand by referring to another evil supposedly closer to home. As a method of persuasion it was not new in the eighteenth century. Indeed, 'charity begins at home' had been proverbial for centuries, probably as a misquotation of the Biblical text 'learn first to shew piety at home'.²¹ This argument becomes sentimentalised when it is combined with one of the other forms of sentimental persuasion, for example, when the group to act as the diversion are described in particularly sentimental language, or are presented in a sentimental parable.

²⁰ Sarah Scott, *The History of Sir George Ellison* (1766), ed. Betty Rizzo (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), p. 4.

²¹ 1 Timothy, 5: 4.

An interesting point is that since 'home' was as likely to refer to Britain as the 'home country' as much as it referred to one's domestic arrangements this argument was particularly useful for pro-slavery writers seeking to undermine the sentimental arguments of abolitionists. It was also useful to anti-feminists who were able to apply a much narrower definition of 'home' and were therefore able to undermine philanthropic work done by women. A very famous example of this usage, rather later than the period under examination here, is Charles Dickens's portrayal of Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House* (1852-1853). Here the 'telescopic philanthropy' through which Mrs Jellyby's family were ignored, though close at hand, in favour of the inhabitants of the faraway Borrioboola-Gha, rehearsed an argument which had already been made by many of the pro-slavery writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Diversionsary tactics such as these dogged philanthropic writers and are frequently examined, criticised, and refuted. The Edinburgh philanthropist Thomas Tod spoke for many when he claimed that 'narrow minds, whose charities begin and end at home, will soon wish to center all in self, where, void of social love, neither pleasure nor satisfaction can ever dwell'.²² A rather more celebrated example of the irritation this technique produced occurred during William Wilberforce's speech on the abolition of the slave trade which he delivered before Parliament in February 1807. Wilberforce is reported to have argued:

It was said, why not put an end to the lottery, and other evils in this country? He acknowledged that he considered the lottery a very bad mode of raising money, and would concur in any measure for putting an end to it, if there were any prospect of success in the attempt; but he was sorry to see gentlemen reduced to arguments of this sort. They searched out every recess of misery and vice in their own country, they looked around them every where for evils, and hugged them all to their bosoms. They then said, if you can make these

²² Thomas Tod, *An Account of the Rise, Progress, Present State, and Intended Enlargements, of the Orphan Hospital. To which is added, Poetical Meditations on Various Subjects* (Edinburgh: James Donaldson, 1785), p. 35.

evils and the Slave Trade pair off together we have no objection; but unless you can do this, we will retain them all.²³

Wilberforce neatly exposes the flaw in the diversionary arguments which he frequently had to face and rightly ridicules the idea that 'evils' can only be abolished *en masse*. He also hints at the sentimental approach taken by his opponents when they put forward these diversionary arguments. As well as 'evils' his opponents search out 'misery', surely the domain of sentimentalists, and hug this misery 'to their bosoms'. This physical engrossment of misery is a rather sinister mirror image of the physical symptoms, especially weeping, displayed by sincere sentimentalists. But while the physical movement involved in weeping is outwards from the body, the physical movement displayed by these false sentimentalists is an inward one. In Wilberforce's analysis even the monopolisation of misery can be a selfish act.

From a logical standpoint diversionary arguments are massively flawed. The 'charity begins at home' argument is a frequently invoked enthymeme but is based on a false premise. 'Charity begins at home' is not axiomatic but is merely the misquotation of Paul's opinion in his letter to Timothy. This diversionary argument appeals to the reader's prejudice which is situated not in reason but in emotion. But this did not stop it being used as a rather unconvincing logical proof by those who wished to divert attention away from the subject under discussion.

The Emotional Subversion of the Intellect.

The emotional subversion of the intellect is a method by which the impact of a logical, or even merely a reasonable, argument is altered by an appeal to the emotions. Classical rhetoric had always provided for a degree of emotional subversion of the intellect, but in the main it was felt that these sorts of arguments

²³ *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates*, VIII, 993-4; *The Morning Herald* (Tuesday 24 February 1807).

were rather below the dignity of a competent and well-bred orator. Indeed, they were frequently brought together under the heading of *ad populum* arguments reflecting the belief that rational debate was the province of the upper classes while passionate appeals were of more use in persuading the lower classes. (The exception, perhaps, was at time of war when it might be thought appropriate to excite emotions of fear and anger at an approaching enemy.) However, sentimental emotional subversion of the intellect is markedly different in that while most classical *ad populum* discourse appealed to the lowest feelings of the crowd, sentimental emotional subversion maintained that it was part of a refined, 'civilised', discourse. The delicate sensibilities which it invoked were a far cry from the rabble-rousing oratory addressed *ad populum*, or 'to the common people'. In this respect the rhetoric of sensibility differed markedly from classical rhetoric. The emotional appeal, far from being something of a cheat or a vulgar argument at best, was now an integral part of the persuasive strategies of many late-eighteenth-century political writers and speakers.

There are two main varieties of sentimental emotional subversion. The first, and simplest, occurs when rational proofs are dismissed in favour of emotional ones. Edmund Burke is the author of some notable examples of this, perhaps the most famous being his lament, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) over the fate of Marie-Antoinette whom he remembered seeing at Versailles 'sixteen or seventeen years' before the revolution:

I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in,—glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendor, and joy. Oh! What a revolution! and what a heart must I have to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall! [...] I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult.—But the age of chivalry is gone.—That of

sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever.²⁴

A central aspect of Burke's account is the emotion he feels at Marie-Antoinette's 'fall'. He digs deeply for a response from the reader by hinting at the enormity of not feeling as strong an emotion as he does at her predicament. His readers are forced to look for their own strong emotions in order to keep up, as it were, with Burke's horror at the event. This introduces the idea that only a strong emotional response is appropriate and thus conditions (emotionally subverts) our response to anything which comes later. Here we have an even stronger indication that in Burke's rhetorical account of the French queen feelings are more important than rational ideas. Burke tells us that it is an assumption of his that any insult directed towards the queen would meet with the instant drawing of arms by ten thousand men. This is hyperbole, a trope familiar to old and new rhetoricians, which here serves to amplify the honour and—more crucially—the anger which must be felt when Marie-Antoinette is threatened with an insult. Again an emotional response is demanded from the reader.

So far Burke's rhetoric has been spirited and emotional—pathetic in the classical sense—but it hasn't been entirely sentimental, despite his insistence on the role his heart has to play in all this. The final two sentences of the extract change that. There is an abrupt shift from anger to nostalgia as the predominant feeling while the tone shifts from one of outrage to one of lamentation, a favourite tone of voice for sentimentalists. What follows is Burke's contention that 'the age of chivalry is gone. —That of sophisters, oeconomists, and calculators, has succeeded'. This is indeed the position of the sentimentalist in its lament that rationalists and scientists have taken over from those chivalrous persons who see the world largely through the medium of their own emotions. In short, Burke emotionally subverts the intellect. He starts by discussing a scene in emotional terms and he ends by dismissing those who see the world in any other way. Here, rational proofs are

²⁴ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1969), pp. 168-70.

clearly dismissed in favour of emotional ones, a strategy which repeated throughout the *Reflections* led Mary Wollstonecraft to conclude that Burke had 'a mortal antipathy to reason'.²⁵

The second variety of emotional subversion of the intellect occurs when emotional arguments are used to alter the mood in which a reader or listener receives a reasoned argument. In particular, this is seen where sentimental arguments come before 'scientific' proofs, often statistics, with the hope that the reader will be more likely to accept these proofs at face value after his or her 'resistance' has been lowered by prior exposure to the emotional argument. This sort of argument is rarely seen in novels or other imaginative forms of literature where hard evidence is seldom required. Instead, it is found in letters to newspapers and magazines, in speeches made before Parliament and in public, and in political tracts and pamphlets. In some cases a short sentimental passage immediately precedes a rational argument. In many other cases the sentiment and the argument have a more distant relationship. The latter group is more typical. Amongst these are texts in which the political arguments are embedded within a generally sentimental narrative, texts in which the 'pathetic' and the 'argumentative' parts are in separate long passages or chapters, and texts in which the sentimental material is kept entirely separate from the argument.

Amongst those texts in which political arguments are embedded within a generally sentimental narrative can be listed the *Cheap Repository Tracts*, many of which were the work of Hannah More. These tracts were originally issued singly at a low cost with the intention of reaching a very wide popular audience but from the mid 1790s were collected and published in a number of anthologies.²⁶ The range of subject material is wide, but with a distinct tendency to promote both social quietism and evangelical fervour. The format differs slightly from tract to tract, with some including poetry, but in the main a short narrative is presented which

²⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), in ed. Janet Todd, *Political Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 8.

²⁶ Including: *Cheap Repository Tracts*, 2 vols (London: J. Marshall, 1796-1797), and *Cheap Repository Shorter Tracts*, 3 vols (London: F. and C. Rivington, 1798).

dwells on the tragic consequences of indulging in allegedly non-Christian behaviour. Denounced as sinful are such predictable activities as frequenting gin shops, gambling (both on horses and the lottery), and prostitution. Some of the moral lessons, such as that which warns of 'the danger of playing with edge tools', seem rather far removed from the normal concern of sermon writers. Others, such as the tracts which admonish rioting and naval mutiny, are more pointedly political in nature. The last of these make it clear that the then recent mutinies aboard ships moored off Spithead and The Nore were abominations against both God and the state.²⁷

Evangelical arguments against gambling and drunkenness were in many ways as political as those which sought to secure the obedience and patriotism of seamen. In the *Cheap Repository Tracts* these different modes of unacceptable behaviour achieve a level of equivalence, both in the amount of space dedicated to each and in the sentimental style in which the moral tales are told. In most cases we are presented with a sentimental parable in which an instance of bad behaviour brings about the ruin of an individual whose drift into misery is accompanied with increasing quantities of sighs, groans, and tears. The stories are usually domestic ones and, where not immediately set in the home, we are usually allowed to see the devastating effects the sinful behaviour ultimately has on the sinner's family. Very occasionally the stories deviate from a familiar, domestic setting and venture into the realm of allegory. Even then they remain sentimental. One such allegory is titled 'Bear Ye one Another's Burthens; or, The Valley of Tears. A Vision.' The message is one of common humanity signalled by the equality of feeling, the world a valley in which we are all travellers:

These Travellers entered it weeping and crying, and left it in very great pain and anguish. This vast valley was full of people of all colours, ages, sizes, and descriptions: but whether white or black, or tawney, all were travelling the same road.²⁸

²⁷ *Cheap Repository Shorter Tracts*, pp. 419-426.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

Singled out for particular attention in this valley are widows, husbands, kind neighbours, clergymen, and Negroes. All are to be viewed as sentimental heroes, either for the suffering they have undergone or the generosity they display to others. The valley of tears as a metaphor for life was not new in the eighteenth century, being originally derived from a biblical reference.²⁹ It was, however, of particular use to sentimentalists who saw tears as a key indicator of the inward state. The central position accorded this allegory in the *Cheap Repository Shorter Tracts*—it fills two full tracts—signals the central position accorded the rhetoric of tears by the tract writers, principally Hannah More. And while individual political and social points are not always couched in sentimental language or sentimental arguments in the tracts, the political points are made within a generally sentimental set of narratives interspersed with sentimental poetry and allegory. The idea, it seems, is to emotionally influence the reader in general terms in the hope of creating an emotional state conducive to internalising the moral, social, and political arguments which are the *raison d'être* of the tracts.

A similar form of emotional subversion occurs in texts where the pathetic and the argumentative parts, to use eighteenth-century terminology, are contained within the same narrative or argument, but in separate long passages or chapters. Amongst these we could point to Jonas Hanway's *A Sentimental History of Chimney Sweepers* which appeared in 1785. The reader is unambiguously alerted to Hanway's sentimentalism in the title of this book, but may be disappointed to find it contains much dry statistical evidence and clear unemotional reportage of a then current social problem. There are sentimental passages in this work, but they are few and seem to be there in order to suggest an approach to the book rather than to seriously emotionally subvert the reader's understanding of the work. For example, in common with other sentimental writers Hanway sees sympathy as a driving principle, arguing 'that so much is dependent on sympathy in the sufferings

²⁹ Psalms 84: 6. The Authorised Version has 'Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well; the rain also filleth the pools.' The Revised Version (1885) first translated the Hebrew 'Baca' as 'weeping' but the meaning of 'Baca' was widely known in the eighteenth-century and before.

of others, it is universally agreed, that man ceases to deserve his exalted pre-eminence, as lord of this lower world, when he ceases to indulge that quality'.³⁰ The reader is thus directed to be sympathetic towards the suffering child chimney sweeps who are later described. And although much of the book is unemotional an emotional reading is suggested: 'reason and passion', Hanway tells us, 'mix their tears; they conceal not their sorrows from your eyes, they blend their efforts'.³¹ Almost all the sentimental matter in this 'sentimental history' is contained in 'The Petition' which appears in the opening pages. Having been exhorted to take a sentimental, an emotional, or at least, a sympathetic approach, the reader is left to get on with it. The emotional subversion, such as it is, is present within the main argument but occupies its own space within that argument.

Perhaps the most curious texts which appear to aim at emotional subversion are those in which a completely separate sentimental section is added to what is otherwise a wholly unsentimental argument. Thomas Tod, whose thoughts on charity we have already seen, provided a long polemical account of the past and intended future state of the Edinburgh Orphan Hospital without providing much in the way of sentiment. That was in the first half of his book. The second half is entirely devoted to 'Poetical Meditations on Various Subjects'. The poems are thoroughly sentimental and the intention appears to have been to appeal both to the head and the heart, though not at the same time. Tod was not alone in producing this sort of blend. In 1792 an account of the Dublin orphanage appeared in which the reasons for its existence were given along with the minutes and accounts of the organisation running it. All this is laid out in business-like language with no attempt made to address the reader's sensibility. At the end of the pamphlet, however, two poems are appended which are rather different in tone. The second stanza of the poem titled 'The Orphan Relieved' runs:

³⁰ Jonas Hanway, *A Sentimental History of Chimney Sweepers in London & Westminster. Shewing the Necessity of putting them under Regulations, to prevent the grossest Inhumanity to the Climbing Boys. With a Letter to a London Clergyman on Sunday Schools. calculated for the preservation of the Children of the Poor.* (London: Dodsley & Sewell, 1785), p. ii.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. iii.

With streaming eyes, celestial pity view'd
 The woes she shar'd, she hasted to relieve;
 To active charity my sufferings shar'd,
 And flew with her, and bade me cease to grieve.³²

This may not be the finest poetry produced in Ireland in the eighteenth century, but it must rank amongst the most sentimental. All the keywords of sentimental philanthropy are found in this poem, many in this stanza alone. We are presented with the image of a personified 'celestial pity' weeping sympathetic tears with a suffering orphan who will be relieved through 'active charity'. As sentimental poems go this is not particularly unusual. What makes it interesting is its position within a very businesslike account of the running of an orphanage. We can only speculate as to the exact circumstances leading to the insertion of the two poems, but their effect, coming after much dry material, is to emotionally subvert the intellect and to reassert the notion that the orphanage business is, at the end of the day, a benevolent mission concerned with the relief of suffering.

The examples by More, Hanway, Tod and the author of *The Orphan-House* each illustrate a form of emotional subversion of the intellect used by sentimental rhetoricians, yet in these examples the relationship between the sentiment and the argument is not a direct one. Unlike in these examples, the most direct and the most effective form of emotional subversion occurs when a short sentimental passage immediately precedes or follows a rational argument with the express intention of stirring the feelings to undermine—or underscore—the rational argument. In some cases, particularly literary ones, a logical conclusion is not reached and instead the protagonists dissolve the argument in tears. This is particularly true of Mackenzie's novel *The Man of Feeling* in which almost every chapter ends with such an outburst. In political sentimental rhetoric, however, the emotional scene more often precedes the statistical or rational evidence which is to come in the hope of 'softening up' the reader. This is true emotional subversion of

³² *The Orphan-House: Being a Brief History of that Institution, and of the Proceedings of the Founders and Directors of that Asylum or Place of Refuge for Destitute Female Children. Situate at No. 42, Prussia – Street* (Dublin: George Bonham, 1792), p. 18.

the intellect, the rhetorical technique by which the rhetorician seeks to emotionally prepare the reader or listener to accept the arguments which are to come.

This approach was used frequently by anti-slavery writers, and numerous examples from the anti-slavery corpus will be explored in later chapters of this dissertation. Examples from political texts outside the slavery debate are harder to come by in this period but still exist. In this fictional example, taken from Mary Pilkington's novel *Henry; or, The Foundling* (1799) the main character, Mr Coverley, has a foundling deposited at his doorstep. He orders Richard, his manservant, to take it to the workhouse but Richard refuses, saying;

Why, I'd sooner carry it to its *grave*, for then there'd be an end to all its troubles; and I remember too well, what I suffered, when a boy, myself, ever to be the cause of such misery to another! No, your honor, continued the honest creature, softening his tone and looking at his master with an eye of supplication, you won't have a heart to send it to the workhouse I know? And as the matter of what the poor thing would eat and drink, why, you'd miss it no more than a drop of water taken out of the sea. And as to the clothes, he can wear master Edward's: and so then, he'll not *cost* your honor a *farthing*.³³

The scenario is immediately reminiscent of a similar scene at the start of Fielding's *Tom Jones*, although Mr Coverley (the namesake of a stupid and conceited character in Frances Burney's *Evelina*) and Richard respectively behave as exact opposites of Squire Allworthy and his servant Deborah Wilkins.³⁴ But these allusions aside, what Pilkington has provided is a clear example of a direct form of emotional subversion of the intellect in which Richard appeals first to the heart and then to the head. He first alerts Coverley to the suffering, the 'troubles', of the child before explaining how he himself has suffered in a similar manner. He shows

³³ Mary Pilkington, *Henry; or, The Foundling: To which are added The Prejudiced Parent; or, the Virtuous Daughter. Tales, Calculated to Improve the Mind and Morals of Youth* (London: Vernor and Hood, 1799), pp. 5-6.

³⁴ Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones* (1749) ed. R.P.C. Mutter (London: Penguin, 1966), pp. 55-58; Frances Burney, *Evelina, or, the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778), ed. Margaret Anne Doody (London: Penguin, 1994).

how he is able to sympathise with the child, and suggests that 'misery' can be the only result of a childhood in the workhouse. Having established his sympathetic credentials Richard then alters his tone and his body language before making a direct assault on the feelings of his employer, saying 'you won't have a heart to send it to the workhouse I know?'. The punctuation is odd, perhaps indicating that Richard does indeed have doubts about Coverley's heart, but having done his best to rouse Coverley's feelings in favour of the foundling Richard moves swiftly on from an argument based on feeling and sympathy to one which is altogether more rational. Adopting the child will not cost Coverley a farthing.

Richard's strategy is simplistic. He is of lower social status than Coverley and, implicitly, the reader. He is also described as an 'honest creature', a formulation which to the eighteenth-century reader signified simplicity and innocence of the ways of the world far more than it drew attention to Richard's trustworthiness in any legal or moral sense. But this innocence does not prevent Richard from possessing a strong natural sensibility. He appeals directly to the feelings of his employer in the hope of emotionally subverting his intellectual response to the situation. He completes his sentimental argument by interrogating Coverley, by asking him if he too is a man of sensibility. Coverley's heart, Richard reminds him, is surely too big to send the child to the workhouse. Richard's strategy partly praises Coverley for his supposed sensibility and partly taunts him to prove that he is a man of feeling. Caught between flattery and criticism and alerted to his potential hypocrisy, Coverley's intellect may well have been subverted. Now is the time for Richard, again in a somewhat simplistic manner, to mention that his employer will not suffer economically from his act of charity. Emotions have been brought to the fore and Richard is able to sneak in the rational argument to support the humanitarian one already in the open. In an emotionally weakened state Coverley should be unable to resist.

Unfortunately, Coverley's heart is fixed against even the most powerful sentimental argument. Luckily for the foundling a note is discovered which says: 'whoever has humanity enough to protect an unfortunate infant, will be amply rewarded for the

kindness they bestow.’ This seems to get things moving and ‘a sudden impulse relaxed the severity of Mr Coverley’s features; and that heart, which had remained inflexible to the *pleadings of humanity*, became softened at the sound of *interest*.’³⁵ Pilkington’s tale clearly illustrates the operation of emotional subversion of the intellect, but it also signals its limitations. For the technique to work the person addressed must have sensibility to be engaged. In political writing and oratory, where the audience is much larger, the tactic might work well with many, but it also leaves itself open to ready detection, criticism, and even ridicule by those who absolutely oppose the argument, or whose feelings are less susceptible of manipulation.

Style and Arrangement

Arrangement is concerned with the form and structure of an argument, which was very closely regulated in classical rhetoric, while style concerns itself with the tone, diction and figures of speech used by the writer or orator. The use of all of these was being reappraised by eighteenth-century rhetoricians and Wilbur Howell notes that one debate ‘concerned the question whether a speech had to adhere to the six-part form so fully elaborated in Ciceronian rhetoric, or whether a simpler form was desirable’, while another asked ‘whether rhetorical style should be ornate, intricate, and heavily committed to the use of tropes and figures, or should be plain and unstudied’.³⁶ The debate was not merely confined to speeches, of course, although the ‘six-part form’ of which he speaks was never commonly found in its pure form in written arguments. It was the orator in Parliament, or in a court of law, who was most likely to stick to the Ciceronian pattern of exordium, narration, proposition, and so on. However, as we saw earlier, even in Parliament the classical structure appears to have been increasingly ignored in the early eighteenth century, to the point where David Hume could plead with parliamentarians to resist slavish adherence to Ciceronian arrangement, but still: ‘to observe a method, and

³⁵ Pilkington, *Henry; or, The Foundling*, pp. 6-7.

³⁶ Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic*, pp. 441-7, *passim*.

make that method conspicuous to the hearers'.³⁷ Just a few years later Adam Smith was arguing that 'it matters not the least whether the figures of speech are introduced or not' into a speech or piece of persuasive writing.³⁸ Hume and Smith spearheaded the introduction of a rhetoric based on sympathy. Their views on style were equally significant and in part because of those views late-eighteenth-century rhetoric became progressively freer of ornate language in the grand style, of precise though arbitrary divisions, and of figures and tropes merely for the sake of them.

Sentimental rhetoric was by and large unencumbered with the more rigid forms of classical rhetoric. That is not to say that it was entirely free of such things, nor that it developed forms of arrangement entirely independent of those already existing. All the techniques of classical rhetoric were available to sentimental persuaders. By the same token, all the techniques of sentimental rhetoric were available to those who preferred, in the main, to use a classical model. If anything, the rhetoric of sensibility was characterised by the fact that it did not present a unified front, either in its ideology or its methodology. It was at all times local, tactical and opportunistic rather than general, strategic or systematic. As we have seen, it was as possible for long and unsentimental polemics to contain a sentimental set-piece as it was for a generally sentimental narrative to contain, even briefly, a clear and unsentimental political message addressed to those who might not be swayed by the rhetoric of sensibility.

Again, the question of whether sentimental persuaders favoured the grand, middle or low style is not entirely straightforward. Much sentimental writing addresses domestic or familiar themes, while many of the characters featured are the small, the weak, and the politically disenfranchised. For these settings and these characters the low style is traditionally considered the appropriate one. However, this presents a problem. Much of the rhetoric of sensibility is concerned with

³⁷ David Hume, 'Of Eloquence', *Essays*, 2nd edn (1742), reprinted in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (1777), ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), pp. 97-110, p. 110.

³⁸ Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J.C. Bryce and A.S. Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 26.

suffering or pain. In Burke's famous formulation, 'whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger [...] is a source of the *sublime*'.³⁹ Rhetorical descriptions of the sublime are perhaps more appropriately conducted in the grand style. Indeed, the grand style could itself be a source of the sublime if the orator inspired terror in his audience. Novelists such as Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, who combined sentimental, sublime, and Gothic modes, were well aware of the possible overlaps. So too were many persuaders who saw that in the new looseness of style encouraged by the new rhetorics there were opportunities to use sentimental rhetoric to rouse feelings of pity, while there were also opportunities to inspire terror by using a rhetoric allied to the Gothic, or confidence by invoking a scientific rhetoric. In the late eighteenth century, and in particular in philanthropic debates, the rhetoric of sensibility was the most widely used of these rhetorics. But it was not the only one available.

Finally, we must note that sentimental persuaders adopted and adapted a uniquely sentimental tone. In part this tone is based on a direct and personal approach, in which the audience or reader is brought into the confidence of the speaker or writer and asked to share in his or her deepest feelings. It can often be recognised by its diction, in that there are a few dozen words relating to emotion or the outward show of emotion which are used to a very large extent in sentimental discourse. Words such as 'tears', 'weeping', and 'sighs' are found in close proximity to more complex notions such as 'feeling', 'emotion', and 'sympathy', as well as those slippery terms 'sentiment' and 'sensibility'. The Finnish etymologist Eric Erämetsä has identified 147 such terms, although they are a very broad selection and most need to be put into context to realise their supposed sentimentalism. However, Erämetsä does provide a short description of sentimental style which is worth consideration. He argues that:

The most typical sentimental stylistic device seems to be *hyperbole*, of which several types occur. Another important characteristic is the *emotional plural*,

³⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 36.

the use of which was extended to comprise even abstract nouns. *Intensification* and *enumeration* are also typical. A special class of enumeration that enjoyed popularity with eighteenth-century writers was that of placing two or three nouns, adjectives, or verbs together having an equal relation to their context: the *doublet* and *tria*. Finally, *typographical marks* served stylistic purposes.⁴⁰

Erämetsä gives several pages of examples which it is unnecessary to reproduce here although an example of the 'emotional plural' is 'frighted and disturbed'. This is itself a form of the 'doublet' while the 'tria' can be illustrated by the phrase 'a little, sordid, pilfering rogue'.⁴¹ These techniques, and the others mentioned, are not unique to sentimental fiction but Erämetsä shows that they were characteristic. To some extent we can borrow from his account and apply it to the rhetoric of sensibility. If a list of tropes used in sentimental rhetoric were to be drawn up hyperbole, intensification, and enumeration would certainly appear on it. However, the rhetoric of sensibility, as we observed earlier, operated to a large extent without rules and it is therefore difficult to be prescriptive about its tone. All we can say is that the sentimental tone is an integral part of the rhetoric of sensibility, both part of the production of that rhetoric, and one of its symptoms. It may be difficult to pin down precisely, but it remains one of the most recognisable characteristics of the rhetoric of sensibility.

⁴⁰ Eric Erämetsä, *A Study of the Word "Sentimental" and of Other Linguistic Characteristics of the Eighteenth-Century Sentimentalism in England*, *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae*, Series 13, 74, (Helsinki: Helsingin Liike Kinjapaino Oy, 1951), pp. 10-11.

⁴¹ Both examples taken from Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady* (1747-1748), ed. Angus Ross (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 319; p. 209.

Part Two

*The Practice of Sentimental
Rhetoric*

Chapter 3

Slavery and Literary Sentimentalism.

Sentimental rhetoric operated in two spheres: the literary and the political. Both were interested in persuasion, both made use of sentimental heroes, diversion, argument, and parables, and of the emotional subversion of the intellect. Both were concerned with changing the mind of their readers and listeners. Where they differed was in their subject matter; one was predominantly fictional while the other at least purported to be factual. They agreed in the reception which they expected. Both aimed at alerting their audiences to suffering and hoped that their readers would be spurred into taking action to relieve the suffering which they had highlighted. The example chosen here, slavery, was in the eighteenth century being increasingly recognised as a source of widespread human suffering. This view was expounded in numerous political writings, many of which will be examined in later chapters of this dissertation. It was also made manifest in many imaginative writings including some plays, a considerable number of novels, and a very large number of poems. A selection from these writings will form the subject of this chapter, and throughout two questions will be addressed. One will consider how these imaginative writings used sentimental rhetoric to progress the idea of anti-slavery. Another will examine how abolitionist poems, plays, and novels contributed to the development of a rhetoric of sensibility.

While anti-slavery literature from across the eighteenth century will be considered, the focus will be on the period 1780-1800. The survey of the literature offered here is not a comprehensive one, not least because to do the task justice would require considerably more space than is available. Accordingly, the texts have been selected as particularly good examples of sentimental rhetoric. Another reason is that two works already exist which make an effort to examine a broad range of anti-slavery material in the eighteenth century and beyond. The most recent is Moira Ferguson's *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834* which appeared in 1992. As the title suggests this is confined to an

examination of works by women writers and for this reason, while it is useful in many ways, it cannot be said to be comprehensive. Ferguson's arguments are set out with economy in her 'preamble'. She argues that

Anti-slavery protest in prose and poetry by Anglo-Saxon female authors contributed to the development of feminism over a two hundred year period. Concurrently, their texts misrepresented the very African-Caribbean slaves whose freedom they advocated. These writers, moreover, displaced anxieties about their own assumed powerlessness and inferiority onto to their representations of slaves. The condition of white middle-class women's lives—their conscious or unconscious sense of themselves as inferior—set the terms of the anti-slavery debate.¹

Ferguson's efforts to prove these assertions yield rather mixed results. This is in part because the 'Anglo-Saxon female authors' whose works she reads are a far more heterogeneous group than she portrays them. Her choice of authors includes Scottish and Irish women as well as 'Anglo-Saxons'. Their historical locations vary from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century. Catholics, Anglicans (high and low), Methodists, and Quakers are all represented, while their wealth and social status ranges from the Countess of Hertford to Ann Yearsley, the poetical milkmaid of Bristol. Ferguson never seems to doubt that these very different women had exactly the same motivation—conscious or unconscious inferiority—for opposing slavery. Nor does she consider the extent to which this group could be described as uniformly 'middle-class'. Indeed, while her historical generalisations tend to confuse her argument, her contention that 'the condition of white middle-class women's lives [...] set the terms of the anti-slavery debate' is paradoxically undermined by the narrowness of her reading. By focusing on women's texts, most of which are 'literary' forms (poems, novels and plays) rather than polemical texts such as pamphlets and speeches, she has overlooked the influence the avowedly political text bore on the emerging discourse of anti-

¹ Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834* (London: Routledge, 1992).

slavery. Moreover, by almost entirely ignoring the part played by male literary writers such as Laurence Sterne and Henry Mackenzie she deduces a far stronger link between women's experience and the emergence of anti-slavery discourse than could possibly have been the case.

For all the failings of her central arguments Ferguson's readings of individual texts are often revealing ones and her contention that most anti-slavery texts by women 'misrepresented the very African-Caribbean slaves whose freedom they advocated' is undeniable. However, this argument is not a new one and was forcibly expressed by Wylie Sypher in *Guinea's Captive Kings: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (1942). This work has a far better claim to comprehensiveness than Ferguson's book. Hundreds of poems, plays, and novels are examined and Sypher is often happy to sacrifice depth of treatment to ensure inclusivity. The great trunk from which his thesis grows is that 'anti-slavery literature of eighteenth-century England wilfully ignores facts'.² He argues that while pro-slavery writers were only interested in portraying Africans as ignoble, anti-slavery writers conversely represented all Africans as being noble at all times. From this he posits the existence of two literary models: the 'noble Negro' and 'pseudo Africa'. 'The African appears', he tells us, 'as a thoroughly noble figure, idealized out of all semblance of reality, and living in a pastoral Africa—a pseudo-African in a pseudo-Africa.'³

Occasionally one gets the impression that Sypher protests rather too strongly that actual eighteenth-century Africans were not as noble as their literary counterparts. On a purely critical level, however, he does have a point. Slave traders were responsible for kidnapping people from all walks of life. The former slaves Olaudah Equiano, Quobna Ottobah Cugoana and Ukawsaw Gronniosaw all claimed 'noble' birth or 'royal' connections in their autobiographies. However,

² Wylie Sypher, *Guinea's Captive Kings: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), p. 4.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9. Sypher, while recognising some of the literature as sentimental, is more concerned with its primitivist qualities. A discussion of primitivism is beyond the scope of this dissertation but we should note that many of the writers under discussion subscribed to primitivist ideas, particularly those propounded by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

social status was irrelevant to European slave traders and people were generally enslaved purely because they looked healthy enough to command a good price. These claims (true or otherwise) did more to emphasise the cruelty of captivity to middle and upper-class readers sympathetic to the plight of dispossessed nobility than to establish the social background of the majority of slaves. Literary Africans, however, are almost always of noble birth and display the sort of behaviour which eighteenth-century readers would have recognised as noble, albeit in a primitivist mode. Likewise, African literary landscapes are rarely convincing. Some have been researched, but most are taken straight out of classical literature or the writer's ill-informed imagination. The 'noble Negro' and 'pseudo-Africa' are readily observable in eighteenth-century anti-slavery literature.

Beyond these broad concepts, however, Sypher's analysis struggles to remain convincing, while his language and his attitude to questions of race are occasionally dated in a way which can make for difficult reading. His critical positions are often dated as well. In particular, he seems to have had a very troubled relationship with sensibility, arguing, for example, that anti-slavery poets 'addressed not the humanity of the reader but his sentiment. Thus, anti-slavery poetry was often ethically as well as aesthetically hollow.'⁴ The anonymous blurb-writer who added his (or her) words to the dust jacket of the first edition summarised Sypher's views even more succinctly. The 'humanitarian impact' of the abolitionist movement, he tells us, 'was largely smothered by a muck of sentimentality.' These are perhaps stronger words than Sypher might have used and yet the blurb-writer has put his or her finger on the central fact of Sypher's text, namely, that he does not like the material about which he has chosen to write. He does not like it because he feels it betrays real life with its pseudo-Africa and pseudo-Africans, but mostly he does not like it because it wears its heart on its sleeve.

In part Sypher's views reflect the prevailing anti-sentimental mood of the mid-twentieth century. In common with many other critics of the period, Sypher is both judging eighteenth-century literature and thought by emotional standards

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 157-7.

current in the first half of the twentieth century, and fundamentally underestimating the power of the sentimental genre to move and to influence the late-eighteenth-century reader. Anti-slavery writers addressed an audience which was experienced in sensibility and which not only found itself capable of being moved by sentimental writing but which demanded to be so moved. When Sypher argues that anti-slavery poets 'addressed not the humanity of the reader but his sentiment' he fails to recognise the important point that the poets of anti-slavery did not address their reader's sentiment *instead* of their humanity. They addressed their readers' humanity *through* their sentiment. The question, therefore, for eighteenth-century poets, novelists, and dramatists eager to contribute to the abolition movement was the practical one of how best to stimulate and harness their readers' sensibility.

Sentimental literature developed some decades before the development of the mass movement for the abolition of the slave trade. As we have seen from the examples in Chapter Two, the main tropes and arguments of sentimental rhetoric were also available some years before the abolition movement became important. Writers of the literature of anti-slavery therefore drew upon the same background of writing as did the authors of the many pamphlets, newspapers, and speeches which denounced the slave trade. Consequently, there exists between the two modes of arguing a number of close relationships which are sometimes acknowledged openly, sometimes merely alluded to, and sometimes ignored altogether. This close relationship was to prove a both a blessing and a liability for the anti-slavery cause. On the one hand, polemical literature benefited from its ability to borrow from a popular literary discourse by being able to extend itself to wider audiences than may at first sight have appeared possible. On the other hand, its association with a literature popular amongst diverse groups and social classes left it open to accusations of populism, insincerity, and even effeminacy. In a similar vein the literature of anti-slavery gained credibility by its borrowings from 'serious' political discourse. At the same time it could be and was argued that the poems, plays, and novels became worthy, dull, and dry as a result. The following discussion will concentrate on just a few of the available texts, looking first at the novels, secondly at the poetry and, finally, at the drama.

Novels

For almost as long as the British were involved in the slave trade, Africans and slaves appeared in English novels.⁵ A comprehensive review of British anti-slavery fiction might begin, as Sypher's did, with Aphra Behn and Daniel Defoe. These writers predated the sentimental period, however, and while their works are full of notable rhetorical effects it cannot be said that they employed the rhetoric of sensibility. Nor can it be argued that they were unambiguously writers opposed to slavery. Later in the eighteenth century anti-slavery became more of a mainstream concern, culminating in the abolition movement of the 1780s and 1790s. From the mid-century onwards novels of sensibility became more popular as well. Novelists naturally reflected the interests of their audience and responded by producing, in increasing quantities, novels which addressed anti-slavery feeling, or at least which presented an abolitionist vignette.

In these novels the rhetoric of sensibility is clearly in evidence. Authors make sentimental arguments and tell sentimental parables. These parables are invariably either told by or are about a sentimental hero. Serious points about cruelty on the plantations, the status of Africans within the human family, and the economics of slavery are made immediately after or before emotional moments designed to subvert the intellect and force the reader to accept contentious arguments on emotional grounds. Crucially, novels which use sentimental rhetoric to attack, or at least question, slavery began to appear some years before the emergence of a popular discourse of anti-slavery. Here we shall examine the year 1766, which saw contributions to sentimental anti-slavery by Sarah Scott, Laurence Sterne and Ignatius Sancho, before moving on to examine sentiment and anti-slavery in a number of novels to appear later in the century.

⁵ Sypher, p. 259. See also David Dabydeen, ed., *The Black Presence in English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).

1766

Sarah Scott's *The History of Sir George Ellison* is a fictional biography of a virtuous 'man of feeling', Sir George Ellison, who is something of a superman amongst sentimental heroes. It concerns itself with a multitude of social problems, including the relief of debt, the treatment of mental illness, the education of children and the position of unmarried women. Slavery is just one of its concerns and is considered for the most part in two chapters of the first of the four books of the novel. Choosing to go to Jamaica to make his fortune the young Mr Ellison, though declining to own any slaves himself, amasses a fortune by trading in slave-produced goods. Through marriage he acquires a plantation with a number of slaves and, horrified by the cruel treatment which the slaves receive, he sets about improving their lot, much to the horror of his racist wife. Mrs Ellison notwithstanding, he manages to institute a 'humane' system of slave management before his scheming wife conveniently dies, allowing Ellison to return to England, there to disburse extensive charity to the inhabitants of Dorset.

Contemporary reviews of the novel were largely positive, although they tended to see the character of Sir George Ellison as rather improbably benevolent. While *The Monthly Review* thought the book was 'a sober rational feast', *The Critical Review* thought that 'the author has indulged his fancy, more than consulted his judgement, in drawing the Picture of Sir George Ellison'. Although *The Critical Review* was mistaken in assuming the novel's author to be male, they were more accurate in noting the essentially redistributive nature of Ellison's philanthropy—and they approved of the book on this count. 'We may venture to recommend it to every man of fortune', they concluded, 'who has more money than he can rationally employ'. What most caught the attention of both reviewers, however, was the attention paid in the novel to slavery. *The Monthly Review* quoted a long discussion between Mr and Mrs Ellison about the treatment of slaves, excluding quotation from any other part of the book. *The Critical Review* also quoted from the same passage, arguing that Mr Ellison's 'sentiments upon this occasion are

noble, generous, humane, and ought to be engraven in the heart of every West Indian Planter'. For both magazines the slavery passages were both the most affecting and the most illustrative of Mr Ellison's humanity.⁶

More recently, there has been critical debate as to whether Scott's novel counts either as an anti-slavery novel or as a sentimental novel. Sypher believes that it is both, arguing that it 'is a mature novel of anti-slavery, except that the pity for slaves is a mere throb in the pulse of the hero's benignity'. To emphasise the point the work is discussed under the heading of the 'delectable anti-slavery tear'.⁷ Scott's sentimentality is barely addressed by Moira Ferguson, but she is clear that 'Sypher's characterization of *The History of Sir George Ellison* as a mature novel of anti-slavery more than misses the mark' and that Scott provides a 'seemingly categorical endorsement of the status quo, provided slave owners act benignly'.⁸ Markman Ellis, though clear that the novel is sentimental, agrees with Ferguson to an extent arguing that *The History of Sir George Ellison* is a novel of amelioration in that it 'argued for the mitigation of the conditions of slavery, but not its abolition'.⁹ Opposed to both Ferguson and Ellis is Eve W. Stoddard who suggests that Ellison's humane plantation reforms anticipate the strategy of abolitionists such as James Ramsay who saw amelioration as a first step leading inevitably towards emancipation. Likewise, she believes, with a rather narrow definition of the sentimental novel, that 'if the purpose of a sentimental novel is to evoke delectable tears in the reader's eyes, *Sir George Ellison* will not qualify', largely because 'Scott believes in teaching not by emotional appeals but by precept, in textual modelling of desirable behavior'.¹⁰

That such divergent views can exist in such a small body of critical literature suggests that the novel holds complexities which are not immediately apparent. The two chapters which deal with slavery initially appear to be in agreement but

⁶ *Monthly Review*, 35 (1766), 43-6; *Critical Review*, 21 (1766), 281-88.

⁷ Sypher, p. 266.

⁸ Ferguson, p. 104.

⁹ Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 87.

¹⁰ Eve W. Stoddard, 'A Serious Proposal for Slavery Reform: Sarah Scott's *Sir George Ellison*', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 28 (1995), 379-396, p. 381.

closer reading shows that they take a markedly different approach to the slavery question. The first of the two chapters is, as Sypher and Ellis agree, sentimental in tone and content. The second, as Stoddard argues, teaches humanity largely by precept rather than by emotional appeal. The question of whether the novel promotes anti-slavery is more difficult to answer. It was written in 1766, twenty years before an organised anti-slavery movement developed and five years before the Somerset case brought the question of slavery into the open for what was, as far as most British people were concerned, the first time. It cannot therefore be said to represent the views of anyone other than the author and perhaps a few in her circle of acquaintance. For this reason, and because of the repeated hatred of slavery expressed by Ellison, we could say that the novel promotes an anti-slavery view which confines itself to what, in 1766, might have been possible to achieve.

Again, there are complexities. The second chapter, which deals with slavery in a predominantly non-sentimental manner, contains the details of Ellison's plan for a 'humane' plantation. This chapter, however, shows Ellison 'mitigating the suffering of his slaves' rather than displaying his hatred of the institution.¹¹ By so doing it promotes a rational and achievable approach to plantation life which planters could be encouraged to follow. The first chapter is rather different. Here the argument is sentimental and the anti-slavery more explicit. We learn of Ellison that 'slavery was so abhorrent to his nature, and in his opinion so unjustly inflicted, that he had hitherto avoided the keeping any negroes'. Later he tells his wife that 'when you and I are laid in the grave, our lowest black slave will be as great as we are; in the next world perhaps much greater'.¹² The call for the abolition of slavery may not be unequivocally stated here, but the consequences of Ellison's politics and theology tend directly towards that end. It is not unreasonable to argue, then, that *The History of Sir George Ellison* is paradoxically both a sentimental and a non-sentimental novel, as well as being both an anti-slavery novel and one that merely argues for amelioration. It is able to keep its options open simply by taking

¹¹ Sarah Scott, *The History of Sir George Ellison* (1766), ed. Betty Rizzo (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), pp. 13-15.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 10, p. 13.

a different and seemingly contradictory tack in each of the two chapters principally concerned with slavery.

This strategy, Ellis argues, 'is opportunistic and shifting, rather than rational and "scholarly". Scott's interest is in hitting as many sentimental notes as she can, rather than conducting an internally coherent political argument'.¹³ Stoddard's view is somewhat different. She maintains that Scott's argument is coherent, but her evidence for this is largely external. She points out that Ellison's scheme in the novel bears considerable similarities to proposals later put forward by Burke, Ramsay and others, writers who 'saw reform as the beginning of a gradual movement toward emancipation.'¹⁴ While this argument is debatable it is not implausible, especially when a close reading of the two slavery chapters in *The History of Sir George Ellison* suggests that Scott's political rhetoric is a good deal less 'opportunistic and shifting' than Ellis suggests. Indeed, what Scott offers is a thoroughly worked-out example of sentimental rhetoric in which a sentimental parable, starring a sentimental hero, is told to emotionally subvert the intellect in preparation for the reception of a 'rational' political scheme to at least mitigate the worst excesses of slavery and arguably to set the ball rolling towards emancipation.

We can examine the first of these two chapters in detail. Here Ellison meets and weds a widow and through the marriage inherits 'a considerable plantation with a numerous race of slaves'. Ellison recoils at the treatment of the slaves although his wife is hardened to them and, indeed, 'they had not been married above a week, before Mr. Ellison gave great offence to her and her steward, by putting a stop to a most severe punishment just beginning to be inflicted on a number of them', a punishment handed down for being drunk on a holiday. The steward laments that 'all order was now abolished' while Mrs. Ellison, pitying her husband's 'failings', attempts to explain to him the great 'impropriety' he has committed in setting plantation society upside down in this way. The reforming Ellison replies by recounting the 'extacy' he felt when his slaves showed him their gratitude:

¹³ Ellis, pp. 104-5.

¹⁴ Stoddard, p. 392.

Had you, my dear, been present when they threw themselves at my feet, embraced my knees, and lifting up their streaming eyes to heaven, prayed with inexpressible fervency to their supposed Gods to shower down their choicest blessings on me, you would have wept with me; and have owned a delight which nothing in this world can afford, but the relieving our fellow creatures from misery.

Using a sentimental argument Ellison justifies his strategy towards the slaves by describing the emotions it raised, both in himself and in the slaves. Tears, the ubiquitous indicator of sentiment, are shed by all—with the notable exception of the heard-hearted Mrs Ellison. Benevolence is finally posited as the most delightful possible human activity. The passage, as Ellis has pointed out, is a ‘sophisticated and articulate set-piece of sentimental rhetoric’. Ellis does not call this ‘sentimental argument’, but he notes that ‘Ellison appeals to the sentimental as a kind of proof (an argument by emotion) whose discursive force the text suggests is or ought to be irresistible.’¹⁵ In a reading which is detailed and convincing (and which it would be superfluous to paraphrase here) he shows clearly that the passage constitutes sentimental argument as defined in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

Mrs Ellison remains unconvinced by her husband’s sentimental argument, her cynical response being that the slaves ‘rejoiced to find their punishment remitted, as they look upon it as a permission to take the same liberty every holy-day’.¹⁶ A short passage follows in which Ellison signals his intention to ‘find a means of rendering our slaves obedient, without violating the laws of justice and humanity’. His scheme is outlined in the following chapter. Before this is reached, however, Scott inserts a sentimental parable (again described by Ellis as a ‘set-piece’¹⁷) which illustrates Mrs Ellison’s character more clearly than before but which also

¹⁵ Ellis, p. 93.

¹⁶ Scott, p. 11.

¹⁷ Ellis, p. 95.

sends a message to the reader to examine his or her own conscience. The story, as is usually the case with parables, is a simple one. Mrs. Ellison is walking home:

When a favourite lap-dog, seeing her approach the house, in its eagerness to meet her jumped out of the window where it was standing; the height was too great to permit the poor cur to give this mark of affection with impunity; they soon perceived that it had broken its leg, and was in a good deal of pain; this drew a shower of tears from Mrs. Ellison's eyes, who, turning to her husband, said, 'You will laugh at me for my weakness; but I cannot help it.'

Ellison does not laugh, of course, at this sudden show of sensibility but is surprised, he tells her, 'to see such marks of sensibility in a heart that I feared was hardened against the sufferings even of her fellow creatures'. This remark seems hardly likely to do much for Ellison's connubial felicity and indeed prompts Mrs Ellison's indignant reply; 'sure, Mr. Ellison, you do not call negroes my fellow creatures?' Ellison does and defies his wife to prove to him:

That the distinguishing marks of humanity lie in the complexion or turn of features. When you and I are laid in the grave, our lowest black slave will be as great as we are; in the next world perhaps much greater; the present difference is merely adventitious, not natural.

Before Mrs Ellison can engage in this debate, however, Ellison changes the subject and attends to the broken leg of the unfortunate lap-dog. Mrs Ellison, somewhat mollified by this action, ends the chapter viewing her husband's treatment of the slaves as a weakness, albeit an 'amiable weakness'.¹⁸

Mrs Ellison's hypocrisy and inconsistency are highlighted in this sentimental parable while Mr Ellison's reason and sensibility are both brought to the fore. Mrs Ellison proves that she can bring forth tears of sympathy, and thus act with sensibility. However, the occasion of her display of sensibility, an injury to a

¹⁸ Scott., pp. 12-13.

favourite lap-dog, is inappropriate for the amount of emotion she shows and the dog contrasts strongly with the slaves towards whom such emotional shows of sympathy, it is implied, might be appropriate. On the other hand, Ellison emerges as a man both of feeling and of reason. While he is capable of expressing his disagreement with his wife in reasonably robust terms, he is also capable of phrasing that disagreement in a balanced and scientific manner. He attacks the view, current amongst many eighteenth-century thinkers, that Africans were of a different species to Europeans. He is also able to introduce a theological argument about the equality of all people before God. Finally, he reaffirms his sensibility by halting a conversation which he knows to be disagreeable within his marriage, and by turning to undertake his duty of care towards both the lap-dog's broken leg and his wife's hurt feelings.

Ellis argues that the lap-dog incident 'leads nowhere: it is a closing-off device, diffusing enquiry into an amiable and placid equanimity approaching quietism.'¹⁹ This is indeed the short-term effect it has upon Mr and Mrs Ellison's marriage. The effect on the reader may be somewhat different. Throughout the parable of the lap-dog, readers are implicitly invited to examine their own consciences to explore whether they too may be guilty of the same sort of hypocrisy. For many readers the result may have been a disturbing one. Others may have felt rather smug. In any case it is unlikely that many could read this parable without experiencing some sort of potentially destabilising emotion. At the same time the passage, rather than ending in 'equanimity', concludes with a very uneasy equilibrium which seems likely to topple over with the recovery of the lap-dog or the next appearance of a slave. The conflict within the Ellisons' marriage has not been resolved, leaving the reader expecting to be a witness to further marital strife. This combination of emotional effects, playing on readers' ideas of themselves, providing models of good and bad sensibility and holding out the possibility of conflict to come, is an example of the emotional subversion of the intellect.

¹⁹ Ellis, p. 98.

This technique normally exists to prepare the reader for a rational (or merely unemotional) argument which is immediately to follow. With the intellect subverted by the emotions the reader, it is hoped, will quickly accept the argument before enquiring too minutely into the feasibility of the scheme suggested. This is exactly the case in *The History of Sir George Ellison*. Immediately after the lap-dog incident Scott outlines Ellison's programme to improve conditions for the slaves on his plantation in language which is clear, practical, and very far from being sentimental. This plan includes providing the slaves with cottages and plentiful kitchen gardens, allowing the slaves leisure to cultivate their plots and indulge in 'innocent amusements' (that is, those which do not involve 'strong liquor'), and includes the complete abolition of corporal punishment. This programme, Stoddard argues, was a radical one in 1766. 'Scott's specific proposals for the reform of slavery', she suggests, 'are among the earliest and the most progressive in the eighteenth century'.²⁰ As we saw in the introduction these were not necessarily the earliest reform proposals, but they would still have been rather unusual. As such they may have seemed far-fetched to many readers. Scott's rhetorical strategy, then, is a clever one and one typical of sentimental rhetoric. First she creates a sentimental hero (Ellison) who is opposed to slavery and to stand against him she provides a character (his wife) whose sensibility is problematic at best and probably hypocritical and self-serving. She then illustrates these opposing character traits in a sentimental parable (of the lap-dog), a parable which challenges the reader to examine their own sensibility. Then, having entirely subverted the reader's intellect, she presents a radical programme of humanitarian reform which the reader is unable to reject except by allying themselves with the hypocritical and unsentimental Mrs. Ellison.

One reader who might have agreed with this analysis was Ignatius Sancho, a keen novel reader, a butler to the powerful Montagu family (into a branch of which Sarah Scott's sister, Elizabeth, had married), and an African and former slave. Sancho's use of sentimental rhetoric will come in for more detailed examination in Chapter Four; here it is worth noting that a few months after the publication of *The*

²⁰ Stoddard, p. 383.

History of Sir George Ellison Sancho wrote to his literary hero Laurence Sterne (also related by marriage to the Montagus) to praise his and Scott's contribution to an emerging literature of anti-slavery. The ensuing correspondence became one of the most celebrated in the mid-eighteenth century world of letters, although it did not actually come into public view until the posthumous publication of Sterne's letters in 1775. Sancho, enthused by the few words Sterne had produced on slavery in one of his sermons,²¹ wrote to Sterne to say;

Of all my favorite authors, not one has drawn a tear in favour of my miserable black brethren—excepting yourself, and the humane author of *Sir George Ellison*.—I think you will forgive me;—I am sure you will applaud me for beseeching you to give one half hour's attention to slavery, as it is at this day practised in our West Indies.—That subject, handled in your striking manner, would ease the yoke (perhaps) of many—but if only of one—Gracious God!—what a feast to a benevolent heart!²²

Significant here is Sancho's reluctance to ask Sterne to condemn slavery outright. Sterne and Scott are praised for bringing forth tears on behalf of slaves, not for demanding its abolition. Sterne is asked to contribute further to this nascent literature of anti-slavery in the hope that his words might 'ease the yoke' rather than abolish the yoke. Even Sancho, who experienced slavery as a child, seems unwilling to ask for emancipation. Yet Sancho's argument, like Scott's, deals with what is possible and does so in a sentimental manner. Sancho's sentimental argument—the basic form of proof in sentimental rhetoric—is clear. Sterne is exhorted to 'give one half hour's attention to slavery' not merely because slavery is abhorrent but because any easing of the yoke which follows Sterne's intervention will be 'a feast to a benevolent heart'. The emotional effect on the writer's sympathetic affinity with the slave whose yoke is eased, Sancho argues, is of as much importance as the actual easing of that yoke.

²¹ 'Sermon X: Job's Account of the Shortness and Troubles of Life, Considered', *Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 2 vols (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1760), II, pp. 73-105.

²² *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African* (1782), ed. Vincent Carretta (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 74.

This seems a rather self-indulgent argument, but it was an effective one in its context. Sterne replied to Sancho to tell him that, as his letter arrived, ‘I had been writing a tender tale of the sorrows of a friendless poor negro-girl’.²³ Whether or not Sancho’s entreaties had anything to do with the matter, the passage appeared in the next (and final) instalment of the *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. It is a sentimental parable of the sort at which Sterne was particularly adept. Uncle Toby and corporal Trim enter a shop wherein they find ‘a poor negro girl, with a bunch of white feathers slightly tied to the end of a long cane, flapping away flies—not killing them.’ Uncle Toby considers this ‘a pretty picture’ because ‘she had suffered persecution [...] and had learnt mercy’. Trim wonders ‘if a negro has a soul’. Toby is sure that ‘God would not leave him without one’. Finally Toby remarks that it is ‘the fortune of war which has put the whip into our hands now—where it may be hereafter, heaven knows!—but be it where it will, the brave, Trim! will not use it unkindly.’²⁴

This episode is an excellent example of a sentimental parable. The story of an individual—the Negro girl—stands in for the story of a multitude—the slaves. The girl is early on established as a sentimental heroine since though ‘she had suffered persecution [she] had learnt mercy’, refusing even to scourge the flies with her feathery version of the overseer’s whip. This ‘pretty picture’ works by emotionally subverting the intellect, by altering the emotional state in which we will receive the second part of the parable in which Trim and Toby explore the theological and political implications of the image of the Negro girl. Here the two soldiers recreate the discussion held between Mr and Mrs Ellison. First it is established that ‘the negro has a soul’ just as Mr Ellison seeks to prove to his wife that ‘negroes [are] my fellow creatures’. Next it is proved that Africans and Europeans are equal before God. If Africans are without souls, Trim suggests, ‘it would be putting one sadly over the head of another’ while Ellison argues that ‘when you and I are laid

²³ Sterne’s correspondence with Sancho is reproduced by Carretta, pp. 331-6. The versions, both of Sterne and Sancho’s letters, which I quote from here are those which were published in the eighteenth-century, rather than the manuscript versions.

²⁴ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-67), ed. Graham Petrie (London: Penguin, 1967), pp. 578-9.

in the grave, our lowest black slave will be as great as we are'. Finally the political dimension is entered into. It is 'the fortune of war which has put the whip into our hands now', says Toby while Ellison remarks that 'the present difference is merely adventitious, not natural.' Whether or not Sterne intentionally borrowed from Scott, the two authors are taking a nearly identical approach. Sterne's sentimental parable may appear, ultimately, to collapse inwards on itself while Scott's leads onwards to a rational and achievable plan for slavery reform, but the crucial thing is that both chose to insert a sentimental parable into a longer narrative to make serious and difficult points about the theology and politics of slavery.

1777-1790

It was a number of years before sentimental anti-slavery fiction of the quality and popularity of Scott and Sterne's appeared again. As in both of these cases, later works of sentimental fiction containing an anti-slavery message tended to crowd the anti-slavery sentiment into a few pages interpolated into the main narrative. Amongst these Henry Mackenzie's *Julia de Roubigné*, which appeared in 1777, was no exception.²⁵ Mackenzie was already celebrated as the author of sentimental novels, in particular, *The Man of Feeling* (1771), which remains familiar as one of the most tearful of all novels of sentiment. *Julia de Roubigné* contains less weeping and is a darker novel than his earlier ones, although like those it is introduced through the device of the discovered manuscript. It continues as an epistolary novel and it is through the correspondence of Julia de Roubigné and her friend Maria de Roncille that we learn that the former is the daughter of a ruined man whose estates have recently been sold. Seemingly riding to the rescue is the wealthy Count Louis de Montauban who is shown to be a true man of feeling before declaring his love for Julia. At this point we learn that Julia has bestowed her heart elsewhere, in the figure of Savillon, the boy next door. Savillon, however, is no longer available. Seeking his fortune he has travelled to

²⁵ Henry Mackenzie, *Julia De Roubigné, A Tale, in a Series of Letters*, 2 vols (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1777).

the French plantation colony of Martinique. Julia does not accept Montauban's proposal however, not even when she hears that Savillon is about to be married to a wealthy planter's daughter. Finally her resistance breaks down and they marry when she learns that Montauban's generosity has saved her father from a debtors prison.

The story continues in a second volume, but here the correspondence is primarily between Savillon and his friend Beauvarais, who remains in France. Savillon becomes involved in the sugar trade, despite being shocked at the treatment of the slaves. In a long and digressive letter, an extended sentimental parable, we learn how he institutes reforms broadly similar to those suggested in *The History of Sir George Ellison*. His reforming zeal is not enough to keep him in Martinique, however, and he returns to France wealthy and still unmarried. Learning that Julia is now married to Montauban he starts to despair and suggests a last meeting. The meeting is to be a secret one but it comes to the attention of Montauban who succumbs to a fit of jealousy. In a tragic conclusion Montauban poisons Julia and then himself.

The novel, which was not widely reviewed, in some ways resembles *Othello* and Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Its comments on slavery are something of an anomaly since, though positioned almost exactly at the centre of a markedly sentimental novel, they are considerably less sentimental than they might have been. Indeed, while Sypher maintains that Savillon 'founds a sentimental economy' with his reforms, Ellis notes that the book's 'discussion of slavery is played out within the larger conceptual field of commerce and sentimentalism'.²⁶ Both are correct. The sentimental effect of the slavery passage comes not from over-written accounts of the slaves' tears or moving exhortations to the reader to find a heart and follow the hero's example. Instead, a 'sentimental economy' is founded in which Savillon promotes efficiency and maintains order on his plantation by creating personal ties of kindness, loyalty, and obligation. The system appears to work well for Savillon who notes that;

²⁶ Sypher, p. 270; Ellis, p. 118.

I have had the satisfaction of observing those men, under the feeling of good treatment, and the idea of liberty, do more than almost double their number subject to the whip of an overseer. I am under no apprehension of desertion or mutiny; they work with the willingness of freedom, yet are mine with more than the obligation of slavery.²⁷

Ellis argues that Savillon 'has transformed the slave system into feudalism' and that 'the hegemonic structure of Savillon's slave government is based on the subjects' sentimental attachment to their deliverer'. This is a convincing analysis as is Ellis's view that, at least in this case, 'colonial slavery was an arena in which sentimental commercial experiments could be conducted without threatening the established order within the metropolitan political culture.' However, while this commercial experiment is a purely imaginary one and so doubly unthreatening it remains to be seen how far Mackenzie was actually promoting, rather than merely describing, an alternative sentimental economy for the colonies (or anywhere else). Indeed, Mackenzie was less than fully committed to the anti-slavery cause. According to Sypher he 'solemnly repudiates' the anti-slavery of *Julia de Roubigné* in a political text, the *Review of the Principal Proceedings of the Parliament of 1784* which was written in 1791-2 as a document of support for the Pitt ministry.²⁸ Ellis takes issue with Sypher, arguing that in *Julia de Roubigné* Mackenzie's 'argument about slavery is perhaps not as radical as Sypher proposes'.²⁹ Mackenzie's position in the novel is a merely ameliorationist one, says Ellis, while in the *Review* he rehearses both sides of the argument before eventually deciding that Britain's commercial advantage should take precedence. This position is not far removed from that in *Julia de Roubigné* where the humane treatment of the slaves is advocated because it turns to Savillon's commercial advantage. Mackenzie, in Ellis's view, does not 'repudiate' his earlier anti-slavery because he was never entirely opposed to slavery. Ellis, however, neglects to

²⁷ Mackenzie, II, p. 40.

²⁸ Sypher, p. 270.

²⁹ Ellis, p. 127.

examine the passage in which Savillon expresses his doubts about the entire project of slavery, a passage which contains considerable rhetorical complexities:

I have often been tempted to doubt whether there is not an error in the whole plan of negro servitude, and whether whites, or creoles born in the West-Indies, or perhaps cattle, after the manner of European husbandry, would not do the business better and cheaper than the slaves do. The money which the latter cost at first, the sickness (often owing to despondency of mind) to which they are liable after their arrival, and the proportion that die in consequence of it, make the machine, if it may be so called, of a plantation extremely expensive in its operations. In the list of slaves belonging to a wealthy planter, it would astonish you to see the number unfit for service, pining under disease, a burden on their master.³⁰

Within the ameliorationist context of the novel the opening line and the argument which flows from it is rather a powerful one. A temptation to doubt, however, would hardly count as full-blooded anti-slavery in any other context. The possibility that there may be 'an error' in the system of slavery is introduced, however, and Savillon proceeds to outline his thinking. At this stage his reasoning is not so much tempered by humanitarian concerns as by economic ones. The slaves get sick and die and this all adds to their masters' 'burdens' (by which he means costs).³¹ The plantation, he suggests, could as well be worked by cattle as by human beings and plantation society is likened to a 'machine', even in the eighteenth century a usage implying 'a combination of parts moving mechanically, as contrasted with a being having life, consciousness and will. Hence applied to a person who acts merely from habit or obedience to rule, without intelligence'.³² Savillon's doubts about slavery seem to derive directly from his own commercial self-interest and he appears to view the slaves as economic 'units' rather than as

³⁰ Mackenzie, II, p. 41.

³¹ A comparison could be drawn between this description of slavery and the famous analysis offered the previous year by Adam Smith in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), ed. R.H. Campbell, A.S. Skinner, and W.B. Todd, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), I, pp. 98-99.

³² OED2.

human beings. This passage seems rather hard-nosed. Savillon realises this too and, midway through the paragraph he abruptly switches from the language of commerce to the language of sentiment;

—I am talking only as a merchant:—but as a man—good Heavens! when I think of the many thousands of my fellow-creatures groaning under servitude and misery!—Great God! hast thou peopled those regions of thy world for the purpose of casting out their inhabitants to chains and torture?—No; thou gavest them a land teeming with good things, and lighted'st up thy sun to bring forth spontaneous plenty; but the refinements of man, ever at war with thy works, have changed this scene of profusion and luxuriance, into a theatre of rapine, of slavery, and of murder!

This sudden change in the narrative position is marked by an equally sudden change in subject, tone, and even punctuation—the dashes are reminiscent of those used so frequently by Sterne—even more frequently by Sancho—and which were derided by *The Monthly Review* in their review of Sancho's *Letters* as 'an abomination to all accurate writers, and friends to sober punctuation'.³³ The passage itself recalls the sermon by Sterne which prompted Sancho to write his letter, quoting Sterne's words as 'Consider slavery—what it is—how bitter a draught—and how many millions are made to drink it'.³⁴ Savillon may have reduced the number of slaves from millions to thousands, but he very strongly repudiates his earlier analysis of the slaves as part of a 'machine' by referring to them here as 'my fellow-creatures'. This is a direct quotation from that part of *The History of Sir George Ellison* where Mr and Mrs Ellison have their disagreement about slavery, a disagreement which is punctured by the sudden precipitation of a lap-dog. Mackenzie's co-optive strategy is clear here. He has brought on side Sterne, Scott, and Sancho, the three sentimentalists of 1766, to key the reader directly into a familiar and sentimentalised reading of slavery.

³³ *Monthly Review*, 69 (1783), 493.

³⁴ Sancho, *Letters*, p. 74.

As well as this intertextual rhetoric the passage contains its own emotional language which is sentimental in that it emphasises the body (groans, chains, and torture) and argues for the existence of an unpleasant dichotomy between human beings in their feeling and unfeeling roles (man and merchant). The unfeeling role is clearly the subject of some satire here but, in what again becomes an excellent example of the emotional subversion of the intellect, the sentimental argument is allowed, paradoxically, to both refute and underscore the intellectual approach. In the earlier part of the paragraph intellectual arguments were made about the economic advantages to possibly accrue from an abolition of slavery. These are apparently addressed to merchants: men in their unfeeling mode. The sentimental section abruptly breaks in with the argument that common humanity ('as a man') dictates that slavery is unacceptable regardless of the economic arguments. And yet the economic arguments have been made and the sentimental section does not specifically refute them. Rather, Savillon argues that feeling and commerce go hand in hand and that the inferior motives of the merchant can be augmented by the superior motives of the sentimentalist. While his argument suggests that commerce without humanity is morally repugnant, it still permits commercial arguments to stand without humanity. It offers intellectual reasons against slavery and then solidly shores them up with emotional appeals which seem intended to subvert the intellect and topple even the most unfeeling merchant into an anti-slavery position.

The passage continues by taking a third and familiar tack: the theologically primitivist one. Africa is posited as a part of the world closer to Eden than to the modern and European world; it is 'a land teeming with good things' given, in this version, even before God has created light. This paradise is destroyed, inevitably, by 'the refinements of man' but it is not made clear whether Savillon means 'man' or 'Europeans', a confusion which tends to undermine the 'fellow-creatures' rhetoric of a few lines earlier. In either case this is a powerfully emotional, though not a sentimental, conclusion to a complex paragraph in which Mackenzie constructs Savillon as a man of feeling and as an early campaigner, not just for amelioration, but for emancipation as well. Whether Mackenzie himself shared the views which his character Savillon expounds is unclear. What is certain is that

Mackenzie presents the clearest example of anti-slavery to be found in a novel of the 1770s.

In the novels which appeared during the peak of abolitionism in the 1780s and 1790s the anti-slavery was usually more overt. In the main, however, the sentimental techniques the authors used were little different from those which Scott, Sterne and Mackenzie had pioneered, and in many cases were directly inspired by them. Susannah Rowson's *The Inquisitor, or, Invisible Rambler*, which appeared in 1788 during her period in London, is a good example of this tendency. There is scarcely any plot to the novel, in which the hero, as a sort of Addisonian spectator, makes use of a magic ring which renders him invisible to circulate undetected in a number of social and personal circles otherwise closed to him. Being a sentimental hero he uses this power to go about righting wrongs, principally by the application of large quantities of cash. The second volume commences with a discussion of slavery in which even the word itself becomes imbued with sentimental possibilities:

Slave! said I, rising as I spoke, while the sanguine tide that plays about my heart rushed unbidden to my cheeks—

Why did I blush, why did I tremble, as I pronounced the word slave?—It was because I was ashamed of the appellation—It is a word that should never be used between man and man—

The Inquisitor's embarrassment leads him into a reverie in which he conjures up an imaginary African, 'a man born to a good inheritance; and surrounded with all the comforts, all the blessings, he desired—but he was a negro.' He imagines this man's life, home, and family and how he is betrayed into slavery and transported to Barbados and sold. 'Alas! poor man', the Inquisitor apostrophises, 'tears and entreaties are vain; you are in the hands of the sons of Mammon.' The slave's misery grows worse until the passage concludes by showing how:

He is weary of life—he offers up a prayer for his still dear companion, for his children, his hapless enslaved child—He dies—and is thrown into the grave without a prayer to consecrate the ground, without one tear of affection or regret being shed upon his bier.

Had not that poor Negro a soul?³⁵

The parallel with the ‘negro-girl’ passage in *Tristram Shandy* is obvious and indeed Rowson makes it plain in the preface that she is consciously writing her book in imitation of Sterne. The rhetorical technique is familiar too. Here is a sentimental parable outlining an individual story of misery. The moral—that Africans are human beings endowed with souls—is clearly spelt out at the end. The message is presented in the context of a long sentimental novel which continuously blends emotion and social and political argument to keep the intellect continuously subverted (if, indeed, it was ever expected that the reader might approach this novel in an intellectual manner). The writing is clumsier than Sterne’s, and this, perhaps, is what makes Rowson’s novel more typical of the anti-slavery novels of the 1780s. As with Sterne, Scott, and Mackenzie, anti-slavery writing in the 1780s and 1790s tended to be interpolated into longer texts. This is certainly true of Rowson’s novel. Before the late 1780s slavery interested very few writers of novels or any other form of literature. When anti-slavery became one of the most highly contested questions of the decade this situation was rapidly reversed. In common with Rowson, many writers of feeling novels found it irresistible to place a piece of sentimental prose damning slavery somewhere in their novel regardless of how incongruously it sat with the rest of their text. It is for this reason that Wylie Sypher can list more than twenty novels, most of which can only be loosely categorised as anti-slavery literature, which were published between 1785 and 1795.³⁶ Some of these, like Thomas Day’s *Sandford and Merton*, remained popular for many years after slavery had been abolished entirely in the British

³⁵ Susannah Rowson, *The Inquisitor, or, Invisible Rambler*, 2 vols (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1788), II, pp. 3-8.

³⁶ Sypher, pp. 272-303.

colonies.³⁷ Most sank almost without leaving a trace. Significant here is the fact that the majority of these novels used some or all of the elements of sentimental rhetoric to make a case against slavery or the slave trade.

While novelists made use of the rhetoric of sensibility they also contributed to its development. Earlier writers such as Richardson, Sterne and Scott had set the tone, the latter two, as we have seen, paying some attention to slavery. Later novelists applied the sentimental mode of persuasion to an increasing number of social concerns, concerns which were often the subjects of debates being played out in pamphlets, in the newspapers and magazines, and even on the floor of the House of Commons. As we shall see in later chapters of this dissertation, the language and the rhetorical techniques employed by the writers of this political material bore a strong resemblance to sentimental rhetoric found in the novels, as well as in the poems and the drama of anti-slavery.

Poetry

Sentimental poetry in the late eighteenth century was often as politically engaged as prose writing, while political writers frequently quoted from poetry. Rhetoric and poetry were by no means mutually exclusive and writers of the latter often made use of the techniques of sentimental rhetoric. There were differences, of course, from the sentimental rhetoric which appeared in novels, newspapers, and pamphlets. Sentimental arguments in poetry are usually, but not always, presented more simplistically and with more confidence. Sentimental heroes have to be established more quickly and with greater economy of language. For this reason tears, sighs, and other indicators of sensibility appear more frequently. The poetic form has a natural tendency to simplify narrative and focus on single events and individuals. For this reason sentimental parables are less likely to be vignettes inserted into the poem and more likely to form the whole subject of the poem. But

³⁷ Thomas Day, *Sandford and Merton: a Work Intended for the Use of Children* (London: J. Stockdale, 1783-1789).

where there are serious political points to be made in verse the technique of emotional subversion of the intellect comes rapidly into play. In the poetry of anti-slavery emotions are quickly raised and the reader is encouraged to adopt political positions on the strength of those emotions.

This tactic was not lost upon William Roscoe who, in the preface to his 1787 poem *The Wrongs of Africa*, commissioned by the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, set the agenda for the poets of anti-slavery. He argued that 'it is this trade, which setting justice and humanity at defiance, crowds the unhappy Africans in the foul and pestilential holds of ships, where twenty-five thousand perish annually of disease and broken hearts'.³⁸ The slave trade, he could see, was offensive because it was unjust (despite being legal). This established he moves to a broader depiction of the horrors of the trade and, by appealing first to the head and then to the heart, provides the emotionally subversive model which was followed by almost all the poets of anti-slavery. Sandwiched between the medical terms 'pestilential' and 'disease' we are offered the paradigm of the scientific method, a statistic, before Roscoe's focus shifts abruptly. These twenty five thousand 'unhappy Africans' who 'perish annually' are not merely dying from rational causes like disease. They are also dying of 'broken hearts'. The reader, having already swallowed some harsh truths, couched in the language of science, is now forced into making an emotional response. In sympathy with the 'unhappy Africans', he or she might now feel it to be churlish in the extreme to take issue with the statistics.

'Broken hearts' are at the centre of anti-slavery poetry but the hearts that were meant to be broken were not those of the slaves but those of the middle and upper class readers of poetry in Britain. Roscoe may attack 'Sensibility, with wat'ry eye, / Dropping oe'r fancied woes her useless tear'³⁹ yet, when giving reasons against the slave trade, he still maintains it to be impossible 'that representations such as these should fail in a country where men have heads to reason and hearts to feel.'⁴⁰

³⁸ William Roscoe, *The Wrongs of Africa* (London: R. Faulder, 1787-8), 'Preface'.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 'Preface'.

Roscoe's ostensibly anti-sentimental position is in reality an attack only on false sensibility and throughout his poem the tear and the appeal to the heart are given immense privilege. The same is true of many other anti-slavery poets. Hannah More may begin with an invocation to liberty but before long we find that the worst sin the slave trader perpetrates is the refusal to allow the captive slaves 'to weep together'.⁴¹ William Cowper's slave in 'The Negro's Complaint' asks 'What are England's rights?' but moments later complains that 'tears must water' the plantation soil which the slave works.⁴² Throughout the poetry slaves are portrayed as sentimental heroes, men and women of feeling, whose tearful emotional response to their predicament overwhelms the purely physical tortures of the whip and the chain. Slaves weep when taken captive, they weep on board the ships which take them across the Atlantic and when in the plantations they weep at the treatment they are receiving. Back in Africa those who remain weep for their friends and family who are taken captive. The poets themselves admit to weeping over the fate of the slaves while the reader too is encouraged to bring forth tears of sympathy. Of course slaves in the real world wept and had plenty of reason to do so, but in the poetry of anti-slavery this particular response to suffering is privileged over all others. In the sentimental poetry of anti-slavery Africans become sentimental heroes and slaves are endowed with all the outward signs of a highly developed sensibility: weeping, sighing and the almost superhuman ability to attend to the needs of others.

⁴¹ Hannah More, *Slavery, a Poem* (London: T. Cadell, 1788), 106.

⁴² 'The Negro's Complaint' in John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, eds, *The Poems of William Cowper*, 3 vols (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1980-1995), III, pp. 13-14.

Thomas Day's 'The Dying Negro'

An early and also a particularly good example of this tendency can be found in *The Dying Negro*, a poem written in 1773 by Thomas Day in collaboration with his 'very ingenious friend and school-fellow', the lawyer John Bicknell.⁴³ [Figure 4] The poem tells the story of a slave committing suicide after being forcibly carried aboard his master's ship, thereafter to be taken to the plantations, and reminds us that two years after Lord Mansfield's ruling in the Somerset case slaves were still being carried out of the country against their will. According to the 'advertisement', a preface, the poem was completed on 5 June 1773 and was inspired by 'an article of news which appeared last week in the London papers'.⁴⁴ This report appeared in several, but by no means all of the London papers during the last week of May 1773. It was a short report and may have gone unnoticed by many who scanned the columns full of the sort of news which rarely makes the history books. In that week a pawnbroker was attacked by a burglar, a fine gentleman was accosted and robbed by footpads, two children drowned when their boat capsized in the Thames and a young man was gored by a bull at Smithfield. Amongst these was a short paragraph reading:

Tuesday a Black, Servant to Capt. Ordington, who a few days before ran away from his Master and got himself christened, with the intent to marry his fellow-servant, a White woman, being taken and sent on board the Captain's ship in the Thames, took an opportunity of shooting himself through the head.⁴⁵

⁴³ James Keir, *An Account of the Life and Writings of Thomas Day, Esq.* (London: John Stockdale, 1791), p. 39.

⁴⁴ Thomas Day, *The Dying Negro A Poetical Epistle, Supposed to be written by a Black (Who lately shot himself on board a vessel in the river Thames;) to his intended Wife* (London: W. Flexney, 1773), 'Advertisement'.

⁴⁵ This report appeared in at least three newspapers: *The Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 253 (28 May 1773), *The General Evening Post*, 6181 (25-27 May 1773), and *Lloyd's Evening Post* (26-28 May 1773) which is the copy-text used here. Punctuation and capitalisation vary slightly but the wording is identical. The report is reproduced, minus the day and the captain's name, in the 'advertisement' to *The Dying Negro*. I have been unable to locate any references to a Captain Ordington elsewhere. The search is complicated since the Port Books for London between 1696 and 1795 have been destroyed while The General Register of Shipping was not introduced until 1786. No Ordington is mentioned in the obituaries in the *Gentleman's Magazine* between 1773 and 1820.

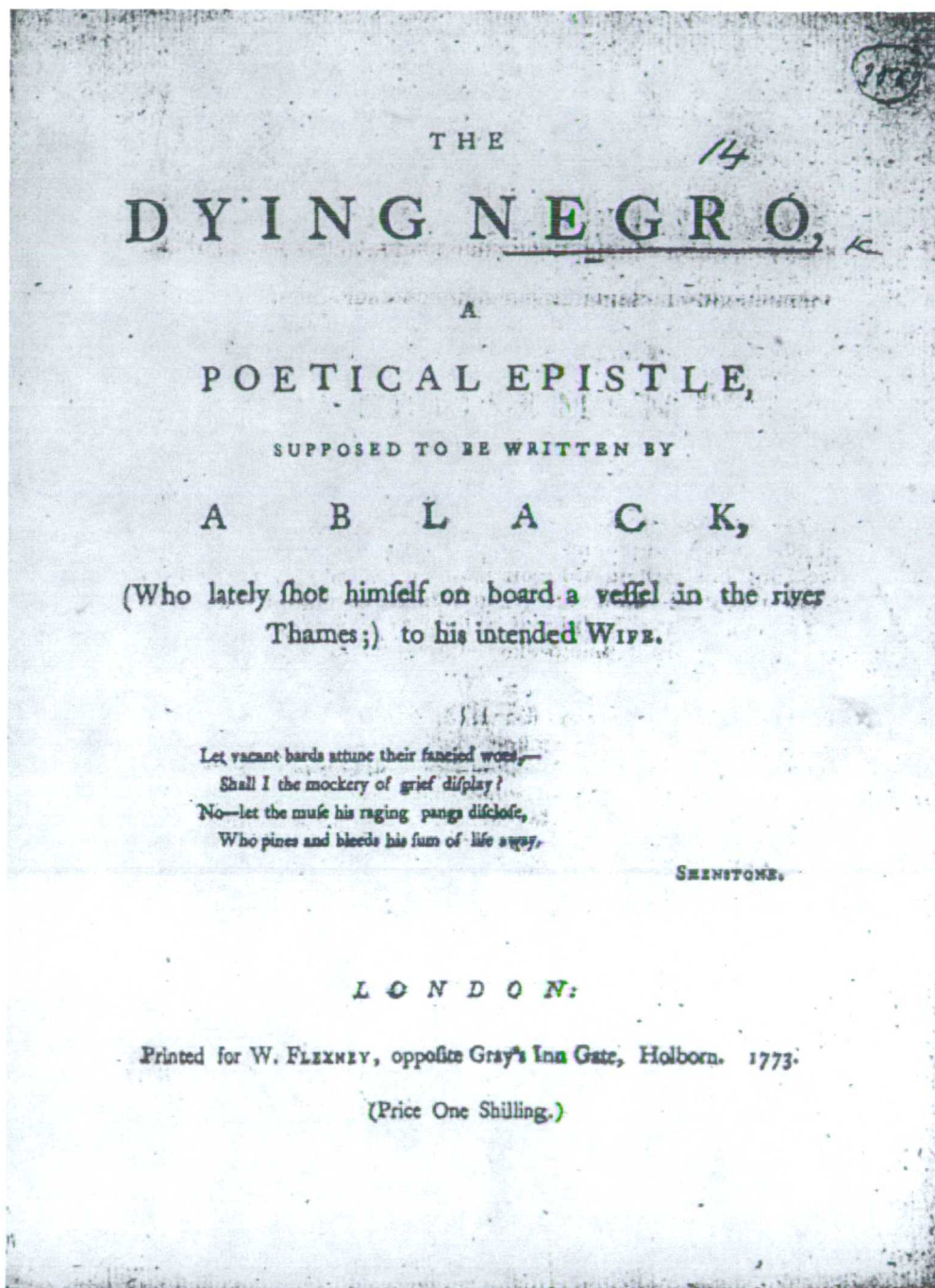


Figure 4

Title page of Thomas Day's *The Dying Negro* (1773)

There was nothing more, but this report was enough to inspire Day and Bicknell to produce their poem, an overtly sentimental work with a serious political message. In particular this poem establishes and promotes the idea of a suffering sentimental hero while also employing the emotional subversion of the intellect. Day signals that this is to be his strategy in the 'advertisement', immediately after quoting the newspaper report. 'The Author trusts,' he tells us,

That in an age and country, in which we boast of philanthropy, and generous sentiments, few persons, (except *West-Indians*) can read the above paragraph, without emotions similar to those, which inspired the following lines. They who are not more inclined to sympathise with the *master*, than the *servant*, upon the occasion,—will perhaps not be displeased at an attempt to delineate the feelings of the latter, in the situation above described.⁴⁶

And indeed, the poem is a suicide note in verse in which the slave gives vent to his feelings at being torn from the woman with whom he has fallen in love as well as being torn from the country in which he now wishes to stay. In the course of a poem largely concerned with his own depression the Dying Negro (his name is not given, either by Day or in the newspaper accounts) also describes the noble spirit of his fellow Africans, the treachery of the European mariners who took him into slavery, the slaves' feelings about their daily routine in the plantations, and the manner in which he won the love of his intended wife.

The poem commences with the Dying Negro reflecting that the only power he has left is that over his own life, which he resolves to take. 'One last embrace denied' he sets down his dying thoughts for his intended wife in the manner of a will, asking his intended to 'take these last sighs—to thee my soul I breathe— / Fond love in dying groans, is all I can bequeathe'. After a long paragraph in which he outlines the nature and cause of his despair he turns to consider slavery in the British plantations. Mingled with tears and groans we find the dying slave expounding some hard facts about the lives of his fellow slaves;

⁴⁶ Day, *Dying Negro*, 'Advertisement'.

Oh! my heart sinks, my dying eyes o'erflow,
 When mem'ry paints the picture of their woe!
 For I have seen them, ere the dawn of day,
 Rouz'd by the lash, go forth their cheerless way
 And while their souls with shame and anguish burn,
 Salute with groans unwelcome morn's return.⁴⁷

The Dying Negro, whose 'eyes o'erflow' at the thought of plantation slavery, is presented as a sentimental hero both for undergoing suffering and for expressing his misery through the medium of tears. Later, his status as a sentimental hero is reinforced when he addresses his 'lost companions in despair' (the slaves remaining on the plantations) 'whose sufferings still my latest tears shall share'. His sympathies are shown to be still engaged even at a great distance in time and space in this line, but in the extract quoted above it is memory which provokes the tears. In this extract the sufferings of many are contrasted with the woe of an individual, in the manner of a sentimental parable, and there is an implicit invitation to the reader to share in this suffering and to be themselves 'rouz'd' to action to stamp out the abomination. The lines quoted here form only part of this long paragraph, but the always emotional and usually sentimental tone continues throughout. This is a clear instance of the emotional subversion of the intellect. Not only are atrocities depicted in terms which appeal to the reader's sensibility as well as his or her sense of moral outrage, but this emotional passage is immediately followed by one which appeals more to the head than the heart.

In this passage the slave-owner is apostrophised and dismissed. His power cannot reach 'beyond the grave' despite the fact that he withheld from the Dying Negro both the 'rights of man' and knowledge of Christ. Avarice is attacked, Africa is described, and the notion of geographical determinism is rubbished. In a footnote it is suggested that 'with proper instruments, and a good will' Africans would become 'excellent Astronomers'. The scientific rationalism of this passage cannot

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

be sustained, however, and at the end Day returns to a description of the sentimental heroism of the African character whose 'contempt of death, and thirst of martial fame' is balanced by the 'pity' which 'melts the sympathizing breast'. Even when our heads are to be engaged, they must always follow our hearts. Immediately after this passage comes a long section in which the Dying Negro tells the story of his life in Africa and his subsequent enslavement. The predominant tone is anger, not sentiment, and the passage concludes with a lament at the slave's powerlessness and a swipe at the evils of 'sordid gold'.

These central passages, rational or emotional, are not for the most part sentimental but are framed by a considerable amount of sentiment. The Dying Negro concludes the story of how he became enslaved and moves on to the story of how he met and fell in love with the woman he intended to marry. The location of the poem alters too and from the deck of the slave ship we now find the poem's hero in a domestic setting, 'beneath one roof' with the servant girl who becomes his love. There is some hint that the Dying Negro is of noble birth in this passage. 'What tho' obscure thy birth,' he remarks to his intended, 'Superior grace / Beam'd in the glowing features of thy face'. Both his seeming nobility and her natural superiority are highlighted by their ability to communicate in the mode of sensibility:

Still as I told the story of my woes,
 With heaving sighs thy lovely bosom rose;
 The trick'ling drops of liquid chrystal stole
 Down thy fair cheek, and mark'd thy pitying soul;
 Dear drops! upon my bleeding heart, like balm
 They fell, and so on my wounded soul grew calm.
 Then my lov'd country, parents, friends forgot;
 Heaven I absolv'd, nor murmur'd at my lot,
 Thy sacred smiles could every pang remove,
 And liberty became less dear than love.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

It is appropriate that this sentimental scene takes place in a domestic setting for, despite all the language of sentimental heroism, sentiment is discovered to be a feminine instinct in the end. Indeed, it is the Dying Negro's sentimental heroism, as opposed to mere physical valour, which awakens first the compassion and next the love of this young woman. A comparison can immediately be drawn with Othello who won the heart of Desdemona by telling her the story of his life. Having heard fragments of that tale she asks him to tell the full story. 'I did consent', Othello tells the Venetian Senate:

And often did beguile her of her tears,
When I did speak of some distressful stroke
That my youth suffer'd.⁴⁹

The Dying Negro does the same thing, using his eloquence to create a sympathetic response in his audience of one. Othello's 'distressful strokes' are incidental to his main narrative, and he is quite clear that he is telling 'the story of my life', but the Dying Slave, as a player in the eighteenth-century cult of distress, has a far tighter focus, telling 'the story of my woes'. These woes introduce a complex interaction of tears, bodies, and souls. Real tears fall from the woman's eyes indicating that she has a 'pitying soul'. The 'dear drops' fall metaphorically upon the Dying Negro's 'bleeding heart' with the effect that his 'wounded soul grew calm'. This sentimental interplay seems intended to move the reader, if possible even to tears, while at the same time introducing a charming domestic vignette of two lovers soothing one another's troubles, a vignette which concludes with the firm, though pleasant, anchor of 'love'. This heart-warming scene does not last long. In a new paragraph the Dying Negro abruptly remembers the position he is presently in. '— Ah! where is now that voice which lull'd my woes' he asks before reminding himself that:

My hopes, my joys, are vanish'd into air,

⁴⁹ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, I, iii.

And now of all that once engag'd my care,
 These chains alone remain, this weapon and despair!⁵⁰

The emotional transition, from domestic sentiment to suicidal despair, is a powerful one calculated to rouse indignation and guide the reader into the final scene of the poem where the slave's despair moves him inexorably towards the madness of suicide. While the reader's sensibility is most certainly engaged by this scene the language is too uncompromising to be sentimental. The soft distress of the preceding scene may have brought forth tears in the reader, but before those tears can be dried horror replaces sentiment. The movement of the whole poem has been one from sentimental despair, through rational arguments about rights and religion, to domestic sentiment and finally to horrific despair. The reader is kept in a state of emotional awareness throughout the poem so that the complex notions which are discussed in the rational section will be accepted uncritically by the emotionally subverted intellect of the reader. The horrors of a life in slavery, suicide, and despair invoke emotions alien to most middle and upper class readers of the late eighteenth century. To augment the emotion found here these horrors are juxtaposed with the more familiar distresses of the sentimental scene. The combined effect is one of high emotion, forcing the reader to recoil strongly from the horrors portrayed but also to accept the arguments made against the slave trade. The indications are that the poem succeeded in doing exactly that. It was widely and enthusiastically received and recognised as a work of anti-slavery, as an extract from *The Monthly Review* clearly illustrates:

[Day] expresses the highest sense of human liberty, and vigorously asserts the natural and universal rights of mankind; in vindicating which, he, of course, condemns and execrates our West-Indian planters, &c. whose tyranny over their unhappy slaves will, we are afraid, in many instances, but too amply justify the severity of his muse.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Day, *Dying Negro*, p. 16.

⁵¹ *Monthly Review*, 49 (1773), 63.

The Monthly Review had no doubts about the target of Day's rhetoric or about the rhetorical power of his poetry, a view which was shared by reviewers in other publications. *The Dying Negro*, then, is both a political and a sentimental work. Although in verse, it clearly displays many of the characteristics of the rhetoric of sensibility. And as one of the earliest anti-slavery poems, it was highly influential within the emerging literary discourse of abolition.

The Late 1780s

As the abolition movement grew in strength the numbers of poets prepared to add their voice to the cause grew as well. In the brief period between 1787 and 1794 well over one hundred poems which dealt with slavery and the slave trade were published, many unceremoniously appearing in the pages of newspapers and magazines. Others were more celebrated while a few, including the anonymous *Wrongs of Almoona*, Hannah More's *Slavery*, and William Roscoe's *The Wrongs of Africa* achieved a sort of fame which, in some degree, has lasted to the present day. These three poems make use of varying levels of sentimental rhetoric even though, in some cases, they maintain that they are opposed to literary sensibility or attempt to represent Africa and Africans in a distinctly unsentimental manner. For example, *The Wrongs of Almoona* (1788) portrays Africans as unsentimental, noble warriors. 'No other poem', says Sypher, 'so forcefully accents the honor of the noble Negro'.⁵² The poem is written as epic, with scenes of hand to hand combat, comradeship in arms and rousing martial speeches. The tone is largely direct and combative. The hero of the poem is Almoona, an African prince transported to slavery in Jamaica. His wife, Teeaina, is forced to become the mistress of Alphonso, a brutal Spanish slave owner. The action takes place in 1655, the year in which England captured Jamaica from Spain. Almoona and the other slaves fight on the side of the English but, before this, Almoona meets his wife and stabs her to death in order to save his and her honour. He then meets Alphonso on the battlefield and kills him. In Sypher's words; 'then comes one of

⁵² Sypher, p. 192.

the most gratuitously noble moments in noble savagery; the dying Spaniard asks whether Almoona forgives him'.⁵³ Almoona's reply is not only a noble one, it is a sentimental one:

'Yes, yes I do' (While tears of anguish ran
Fast down his cheeks) he eagerly reply'd;
(Nor did he strive his soften'd soul to hide,
Which sweet compassion warm'd, as on his knees
He wafted o'er his face the gather'd breeze.)⁵⁴

The tears are there, of course, as the outward sign of inner sensibility and it is significant that Almoona makes no effort to hide his 'soften'd soul'. As with many sentimental heroes the display of sentiment is more important than the sentiment itself. It is also significant that the principle which motivates him is compassion, a synonym of sympathy. Indeed, the two words have the identical root meaning 'to suffer with', the former from Latin, the latter from Greek. Thus Almoona, although portrayed as a noble savage throughout most of the poem, is here shown as a sentimental hero on both the symbolic level (tears) and the level of the sentimental argument (mutual sympathy). In another passage the poet addresses both sentiment and the state of nature debate directly. In a short digression in tone as well as in content we leave the narrative at the point where Almoona is about to murder his wife (although the poet does not present the killing as murder). Here the poet makes clear the philosophy of the poem:

Here let me break the narrative, awhile,
And give *Teeaina* one heart-flowing smile;
Or, rather, give them both the gushing tear,
That drops, with pity, from a heart sincere.
[...]
Then, if thy heart can feel another's woe,

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁵⁴ *The Wrongs of Almoona, or the African's Revenge. A Narrative Poem* (Liverpool: H. Hodgson, 1788), p. 60.

To their poor mem'ry give one tear to flow.
 The purse-proud Christian, whom no feelings grace,
 May scorn, perhaps, the black enslaved race;
 But know, that BEING, which has plac'd thee here,
 With equal goodness smiles o'er ev'ry sphere,
 And makes no diff'rence in the tints of blood—
 (For man is man)⁵⁵

The poet adopts three main positions here. The obvious one is the appeal to the faithful that God created all men equal regardless of their 'tints of blood'. As we have seen this was a standard argument put forwards by anti-slavery campaigners. But this is introduced by a purely sentimental scene: Almoona and Teeaina sharing a 'gushing tear'. The poet is directing our response here. Having assured us that his characters are displaying their emotions he then urges us to do the same—if we are able to. Whether we do allow 'one tear to flow' or not we feel as if we ought to and that it might be churlish not to. We are placed in the position of examining our response to the poem to see if we are sufficiently compassionate to share in the tragedy of these two lovers. The poet then widens the argument from a particular tragedy to the entirety of Anglo-African relations. First the 'purse proud' are condemned as unfeeling, dehumanised by their obsession with money, and then we are reminded that Almoona and Teeaina are Africans. We have already been manipulated into an emotional response to their tragedy. We are now expected to be outraged at the petty mindedness of those 'purse-proud Christians' who 'scorn' the 'enslaved race', for they are not only scorning Africa but also the tragedy of the characters whom we have been getting to know and to feel sympathy for. We have (or feel as if we ought to have) shared a tear with Almoona and Teeaina. When they and their race are scorned we feel as if we too are being scorned. Again we have been manipulated into an emotional response but this time it is not directed towards the tragic lovers but against those economically motivated people who are responsible for slavery and the slave trade.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20. In the fifth line quoted here the text has 'fell' for 'feel' but it seems safe to assume that this is a typographical error.

The *Wrongs of Almoona* is markedly primitivist, in the noble savage tradition, with only moments of sentiment. Those moments, however, come at crucial points in the narrative: immediately before the death of Teeaina and later of Alphonso. The poet recognised that he (or she) needed to generate an emotional response at these moments, but clearly found himself unable to do so within the confine of the epic genre he had adopted. He thus switched from a heroic to a sentimental tone at short notice. Other poets did the reverse, writing predominantly in a sentimental manner but inserting an occasional image of the African as a noble savage, or discussing the happiness of life in the state of nature. Hannah More's *Slavery, A Poem* (1788) is a good example of this. At one point she is happy to make contrasts between Africans and the heroes of antiquity, noting the perversity of prejudice in that 'that very pride / In Afric scourg'd, in Rome was deify'd.' She can, for just a few lines, invoke that most respectable form of eighteenth-century primitivism and draw attention to the martial glory of the classical golden age, but it is a clumsy interpolation and she quickly returns to a more sentimental mode of expression.

More's *Slavery* is in many ways typical of anti-slavery poetry, a fact not surprising considering its popularity and the extent to which it was imitated. It is not, however, marked for either the strength or diversity of its sentimental rhetoric. The poem is structured as a series of themed tableaux. In fewer than three hundred lines it discusses almost every aspect of the slave trade debate, an impressive list which itemised by Moira Ferguson includes 'human bondage, split families, atrocities, unchristian traders, the demeaning of Britain's "name", tributes to parliamentarians and appeals to philanthropy'.⁵⁶ This might seem to be fertile ground for the deployment of sentimental rhetoric but More chooses not to establish sentimental heroes (or, indeed, any sort of character) or to use sentimental parables. There is, however, a strong sentimental argument that runs throughout the poem which contends that all people are equal because all feel the

⁵⁶ Ferguson, p. 150.

same emotions, and the same bodily sensations. This argument is clearly expressed towards the middle of the poem when More asks the reader to:

Plead not, in reason's palpable abuse,
 Their sense of * feeling callous and obtuse:
 From heads to hearts lies Nature's plain appeal,
 Tho' few can reason, all mankind can feel.

The footnote which is added here adds strength to the argument:

* Nothing is more frequent than this cruel and stupid argument, that they [Africans] do not *feel* the miseries inflicted on them as Europeans would do.

This argument is echoed several times, both earlier and later in the poem, and is structurally important as it provides one of a small number of repeated themes bringing some semblance of unity to an otherwise rather disparate poem. The notion of the ability to feel as an indicator of common humanity is also an important argument within the wider discourse of sensibility. Its deployment here allows More to identify herself (and the anti-slavery movement) with that discourse while at the same time gaining strength from it. Sypher notes that this argument is 'the fusion of the enlightened theme of the equality of man with the benevolistic, Hutchesonian theme that all men are equal because *all men feel*.'⁵⁷ More's assumption, it seems, is that her readers are already familiar with the philosophical arguments about the importance of feeling. Her job is to remind her readers that feeling is universal, and not merely the preserve of the 'reasoning' classes. This approach flatters the reader, who would certainly have seen him or herself as amongst that part of humanity which could both reason and feel, but it also contains an implied rebuke. That minority who, in More's view, are lucky enough to be able to reason should not abuse the privilege with bad reasoning. To the sentimentalist the worst reasoning of all is that suffering is the preserve only of a minority. In the paradoxical line, 'tho' few can reason, all mankind can feel', More

⁵⁷ Sypher, p. 194.

both flatters and rebukes the fashionable, sentimental reader. This somewhat ambivalent attitude to sensibility is evident in other parts of *Slavery*. Close to the start of the poem More claims that:

For no fictitious ills these numbers flow,
But living anguish and substantial woe;
No individual griefs my bosom melt,
For millions feel what Oronoko felt.

In the third and fourth lines More seems to be signalling her familiarity with what in this dissertation is called the sentimental parable. Although she uses them liberally elsewhere there are no sentimental parables in *Slavery* and these lines go some way towards explaining why.⁵⁸ More clearly has a very keen sense of the magnitude of slavery, a sense no doubt enhanced by her direct involvement in the Abolition Committee. She also has a strong point to make about the relationship between fictional and non-fictional representations of Africans and slaves. Poetry and novels, as we have seen, included a number of representations of Africa and Africans and slaves and slavery which in most cases had little to do with reality. Here More rejects these representations, typified in the figure of Oroonoko, as superficial and asserts a difference between her poem and others which have come before. Her poem, she seems to be saying, is a contribution to an actual political debate and not merely an aesthetic production. Moreover, it refers to real Africans suffering 'living anguish and substantial woe.'

Critical opinion has been divided in its view of the realism of *Slavery*. Sypher believes that More is 'fully aware of the conditions within the slave-trade, and relies on the information undoubtedly gleaned from Wilberforce and his friends.'⁵⁹ Ferguson is less convinced and argues that the poem 'casts slaves into a mode of radical alterity',⁶⁰ while Patricia Demers notes that More informs 'her appeal to

⁵⁸ For example, the *Cheap Repository Tracts*, which were first suggested by Henry Thornton in 1793, and which were largely written by More over a period of years starting in 1794, are little more than a collection of sentimental parables.

⁵⁹ Sypher, p. 195.

⁶⁰ Ferguson, p. 150.

parliamentarians with the received bourgeois and hegemonic view of the black.’⁶¹ These views are not necessarily antithetical. There is no doubt that More had access to the best information available to any late-eighteenth-century person without direct experience of the slave trade. Equally, there is no doubt that the vast majority of eighteenth-century Britons, including abolition campaigners, subscribed at some level to notions of racial difference. As Demers puts it, while More’s ‘characterization of the black may indeed have contributed to a theory of radical otherness, her intention—despite the inadequate methodology—was reformative’.⁶²

Of greater importance to the relationship between the discourses of sensibility and abolition is More’s seeming unease with the sentimentalism with which readers could weep over the ‘fictitious ills’ of an Oroonoko while doing nothing to bring about an end to slavery in the real world. More’s ostensible anti-sentimentalism in *Slavery*, however, does not seek to attack sensibility, but merely false sensibility. This common sentimental argument prompts an emotional response in the reader by insisting that if they are prepared to weep over ‘fictitious ills’ they must also weep over real suffering. The message is reinforced by an implied warning against hypocrisy. There is also a politically defensive strategy at work here involving a seemingly anti-sentimental message being put forward in sentimental terms. The strategy would seem to be to catch the opposition off their guard and to pre-empt their criticisms of the sentimental manner—while also co-opting them into the sentimental and abolitionist projects. This pro-active approach was not merely precautionary. As the slavery debate intensified, the forces of reaction increasingly deployed their arguments in the popular press. In the arsenal of anti-abolitionism a strong critique of the sentimentalist nature of abolitionist discourse became one of the main weapons of the pro-slavery camp.

The manner in which this argument was played out is illustrated by *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, the most widely-read periodical publication of the period,

⁶¹ Patricia Demers, *The World of Hannah More* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), p. 58.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

in which anti-slavery poetry vied for attention with largely pro-slavery letters and essays. By the time the slave trade had become a hotly disputed issue, *The Gentleman's Magazine* had long been established as a forum for political debate. It had started in the 1730s as a miscellany, promising that it would 'treasure up, as in a magazine, the most remarkable pieces on the subjects above mentioned.' The metaphor is now dead, but in the 1730s the word 'magazine' referred only to a storehouse for miscellaneous equipment; *The Gentleman's Magazine* coined the now familiar usage of the word as an eclectic publication. Those 'above mentioned' subjects included almost everything published in contemporary newspapers and periodicals and it is not unfair to say that *The Gentleman's Magazine* is the most successful example of sustained plagiarism in history. Throughout the eighteenth century the magazine took sides in various political disputes and once the Abolition Committee had initiated its campaign it appears to have become clear to both sides that *The Gentleman's Magazine* would be a battleground. After a short tussle the conservatives won control of the reviewer. Throughout 1787 and until February 1788 reviews of anti-slavery texts were warmly received. Abruptly, in March 1788, the reviewer's position shifted. From this point onwards every abolitionist tract or poem reviewed is rubbished while pro-slavery texts are portrayed in glowing terms. The reasons for this are unclear, although we can attempt a reconstruction. The chief reviewer at this time was Richard Gough, a close personal friend of the editor, John Nichols, and a political conservative, as he made clear in the obituary which he wrote for himself:

On the death of his Fellow Collegian, Mr. Duncombe, in 1786, he occasionally communicated Reviews of Literary Publications to that valuable Miscellany. If he criticised with warmth and severity certain innovations attempted in Church or State, he wrote his sentiments with sincerity and impartiality—in the fullness of a heart deeply impressed with a sense of the excellence and happiness of the English Constitution both in Church or State.⁶³

⁶³ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 79, I (1809), 190-95.

Gough was being modest about the extent of his contribution to the magazine. The obituary was reprinted twice by Nichols and in both cases the first sentence was altered to read: 'in 1786, the department of the review in that valuable Miscellany was, for the most part, committed to him.'⁶⁴ The dating shows that the change in attitude towards the slave trade had nothing to do with Gough's appointment, which had taken place two years earlier, but the two variants agree that Gough was not the sole reviewer. The timing of the change is an important clue to what was going on behind the scenes. In early 1788 the trickle of abolitionist literature became a flood as the Abolition Committee began its campaign in earnest. It seems likely that the conservative Richard Gough decided the review section at least should be following the pro-slavery line. Either Gough took over himself where slavery-related texts were to be discussed or he appointed another more reactionary reviewer for that topic. From this point onwards the abolitionist literature reviewed was routinely subjected to far harsher criticism than it merited on purely aesthetic grounds.

Until early in 1792, when reports of the French Revolution and the slave uprising in St Domingo filtered through and were seized upon by reactionaries, abolitionists had a monopoly on the powerful imagery of abuse and suffering with which to denounce 'this man-stealing, man-buying and man-murdering system'.⁶⁵ On the other hand pro-slavery writers prided themselves on their 'dispassionate' language. They sought to project an image of being governed by facts and not emotions and were certainly sceptical of the sentimental project. Moreover, the essayists in the magazine objected strongly to poets interfering in matters of politics as the contributor calling himself 'No Planter' makes clear in his now widely quoted 1789 contribution:

The vulgar are influenced by names and titles. Instead of SLAVES, let the Negroes be called ASSISTANT-PLANTERS; and we shall not then hear such

⁶⁴John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, 9 vols (London: Nichols, Son, and Bentley, 1812), VI, p. 272, and 'The Rise and Progress of the Magazine', *General Index to the Gentleman's Magazine* (London: John Nichols, 1821), p. lxvi.

⁶⁵'The Isle of Wight Petition on the Slave Trade' *Gentleman's Magazine*, 58, I (1788), 311.

violent outcries against the slave trade by pious divines, tender-hearted poetesses, and short-sighted politicians.⁶⁶

The apparent light-hearted satire of this passage masks bitter criticism of the abolitionists who are accused firstly of being vulgar (that is socially inferior), secondly of paying attention to superficialities like titles rather than hard facts, thirdly of being violent and plural—a mob—and finally of being in various ways weak and hypocritical. The inclusion of ‘poetesses’ alongside representatives of church and state is an interesting one. The elevation of a mere poet, and a female one at that, is there to devalue the male roles of priest and politician both by feminising them and by showing how they have relinquished their responsibilities. The divine has become ‘pious’, in this case meaning sanctimonious rather than devout, while the politician has become ‘short-sighted’—often a synonym for ‘self-interested’. Both of these professionals have switched their attention from the outside world of realities to an interior world of false religion and false attention to the state. In the middle of these two lies the most self-concerned figure of them all; the ‘tender-hearted poetess’ whose sentimental judgements are formed emotionally rather than rationally and whose concerns lie merely with the order of words than with the real world of trade. Viewed from this reactionary position it is the poetess who is the really subversive figure and who therefore must be most closely guarded against.

‘Polinus Alter’, the *nom-de-plume* of another pro-slavery essayist, attacked the monstrous regiment of poetesses under a far broader head arguing that all abolitionism is mere sentimental affectation. He went a step further, though, identifying two of the most popular authors of the previous decade as being both hypocritical and licentious:

Here poetic fiction is sadly misapplied. Our poetesses, who can oppress and abuse one another when opportunity offers, unite in opposition to oppression with as ill a grace as Hawkesworth (whose wife kept a boarding-house for

⁶⁶ ‘On Slavery’, *Gentleman’s Magazine*, 59, I (1789), 334.

young ladies) prostituted his pen to describe the Cytherean pleasures of the South Seas, or the admirers of the English Bramin celebrated his base attachment to another man's wife, and erected a monument in Bristol Cathedral to the worthless Eliza.⁶⁷

This attack is both subtle and complex. The initial attack on the hypocrisy of poetesses seems straightforward enough but this is compared with the sexual hypocrisy which the writer, like many others, believed John Hawkesworth and Laurence Sterne displayed in, respectively, *The Voyages of Captain Cook* and *A Sentimental Journey*.⁶⁸ Not only is the application of poetry to political discussion questioned, but it is insinuated that the morality of the poetesses themselves is questionable. But there are further complications. Both Hawkesworth and Sterne had applied themselves to the topic of slavery, the former in his 1759 adaptation of *Oroonoko*, and the latter in a number of passages in *Tristram Shandy*, *A Sentimental Journey* and a much publicised correspondence with Ignatius Sancho. Moreover, the salient fact of Hawkesworth's *Voyages* is a cultural encounter in which, it was argued by some, Hawkesworth had neglected to take a sufficiently Christian line and had dwelled rather too lovingly on the sexual practises of the inhabitants of Tahiti. Hawkesworth's sympathy for people of other cultures can therefore be dismissed by the essayist as a sexual proclivity. By placing Sterne and Hawkesworth together in this way, 'Polinus Alter' invokes an image of sexual, religious and racial hypocrisy which undermines anything these authors may have said on slavery. Furthermore, the poetesses, normally attacked as 'tender-hearted'—full of laudable sentiment but, as women, not to be expected to understand the hard facts—are propelled into a steamy underworld of sex and immorality merely by their having chosen to write on a question—slavery—which also engaged the attentions of Sterne and Hawkesworth.

⁶⁷ 'Reflections on the Slave Trade', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 58, II (1788), 599.

⁶⁸ John Hawkesworth, *An Account of the Voyages Undertaken by Order of His Present Majesty, for Making Discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere...*, 3 vols (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1773); Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey with The Journal to Eliza and A Political Romance* (1768), ed. Ian Jack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

'No Planter' and 'Polinus Alter' were not the only contributors to the *Gentleman's Magazine* to lambaste the 'poetesses' who challenged the slave trade. It is, however, significant that it was only female poets who came in for this treatment; male poets were left alone by the essayists (although not the reviewers). This would be understandable if the majority of the poets of anti-slavery in this period were indeed women. However, even if we assume that all of the anonymous poems published in this period were written by women, male authors still outnumbered female authors. The essayists who attacked the anti-slavery movement by attacking its poets were clearly taking a simple, though fallacious, line. They were attempting to show that anti-slavery was a feminine, domestic, private and emotion-centred discourse, whereas the arguments in favour of the continuance of slavery were based on real facts understood in the male and public world of commerce. It may have been acceptable, laudable even, for poets to have feelings of sympathy for slaves in private, but when these 'poetical effusions' went hand in hand with a political movement which offered to relieve suffering by attacking vested interests they had to be challenged.

This goes some way towards explaining why for a few years anti-slavery reigned supreme in the poetry section of the *Gentleman's* while the reviews and essays were strongly opposed to abolition. Quite simply, the pro-slavery editors viewed the 'select poetry', the section of the magazine which published readers' poetry, as the magazine's drawing-room: a polite place for the ladies to pour out their hearts but not really connected with the 'real world' of male political discourse. Of course, this argument has its problems as most of the contributors to the poetry section were male. However, although men participated fully in the discourse of sensibility it was one that women could, and did, take a large part in formulating. Pro-slavery campaigners saw anti-slavery poetry as both a sentimental and predominantly feminine discourse and for that reason were disinclined to attack abolitionism and its poets in verse, and happy to criticise anti-slavery by criticising the poetic form in which much anti-slavery sentiment could be found. This may well explain why so few poems supporting the institution of slavery are to be found. James Boswell, who in 1791 published a poem entitled *No Abolition of*

Slavery: or, the Universal Empire of Love, was the exception rather than the rule.⁶⁹

In this context we can understand Hannah More's diffidence about sensibility in *Slavery* and her insistence on demonstrating that her poem draws attention to 'living anguish and substantial woe'. In this context too we can read William Roscoe's poem *The Wrongs of Africa* which was published in 1787 to raise funds for the Abolition Committee. The poem is a long one, in blank verse, and in the jaundiced view of Wylie Sypher 'justifies Roscoe's confession that "At my birth . . . the muses smiled not."⁷⁰ Contemporary reviewers were rather kinder, with the *Monthly Review* arguing that the poet had completed his task with 'judgment, taste, and genius'.⁷¹ On the whole the reviewers were pleased with the poem's heroic form in blank verse, a form (and tone) clearly modelled on *Paradise Lost*. The poem is strong on primitivism, representations of an impossibly idyllic Africa, and stories of slave suicide. It also has a complex relationship with the discourse of sensibility, a relationship which is explored in the opening lines of the poem;

Offspring of love divine, Humanity!
 To who, his eldest born, th'Eternal gave
 Dominion o'er the heart; and taught to touch
 Its varied stops in sweetest unison;
 And strike the string that from a kindred breast
 Responsive vibrates! from the noisy haunts
 Of mercantile confusion, where thy voice
 Is heard not; from the meretricious glare
 Of crowded theatres, where in thy place
 Sits Sensibility, with wat'ry eye,

⁶⁹ The only pro-slavery poems of the abolition period I have so far been able to identify are: James Boswell, *No Abolition of Slavery: or, the Universal Empire of Love* (London: n.p., 1791); George Huddesford, *Topsy Turvy* (London: J. Anderson, 1793); John Walker, *A Descriptive Poem, on the Town and Trade of Liverpool* (Liverpool: H. Hodgson, 1789); J.L. Winn, 'Ode to Bryan Edwards, Esq.', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 59, I (1789), 351.

⁷⁰ Sypher, p. 182.

⁷¹ *Monthly Review*, 78, (1788), 137-40.

Dropping o'er fancied woes her useless tear;
 Come thou, and weep with me substantial ills;
 Torn from their natal shore, and doom'd to bear
 The yoke of servitude in Western climes,
 Sustain.⁷²

Like More, Roscoe is keen to point out that he is addressing a real and not an imagined problem and he makes the point in remarkably similar language: 'Come thou, and weep with me substantial ills' implores Roscoe while More argues 'for no fictitious ill these numbers flow, / But living anguish and substantial woe'. Roscoe's poem came first, and More would certainly have been familiar with it. The likelihood is that More's echoes of Roscoe are a deliberate attempt to promote a unified abolitionist voice, one which in verse denounces false sensibility while demanding a strongly emotional response to the horrors of slavery. Roscoe attacks sentiment in a way which was becoming increasingly familiar in the 1780s; he accuses it of being insincere and 'useless'. The comparison is between an initially personified Humanity, which Roscoe develops into a real principle based on 'mutual sympathy' ('strike the string that from a kindred breast / Responsive vibrates') and Sensibility which is inward looking and self-indulgent, concerned only with 'fancied woes'. It is interesting, however, that Roscoe does not in this extract implore the reader to take political or direct action. His appeal is that the reader should 'weep with me substantial ills', that is, though attacking sentiment, he continues to demand a sentimentalised response.

This is a recurring approach. Later in the poem he portrays an idealised African village which is attacked by African slave traders. As well as the young men of the village being enslaved, women, children and elderly people are ruthlessly targeted by the traders. There is much weeping and Roscoe flags the inhumanity of the traders by their failure to respond to these tears, with a sharp rebuke to any reader who may also be failing to respond:

⁷² William Roscoe, *The Wrongs of Africa* (London: R. Faulder, 1787-8), pp. 1-2.

The tear

Of supplicating age was pour'd in vain:

—Fond tears, and vain attempts! Shall mercy rest

In savage bosoms, when the cultur'd mind

Disclaims her influence?⁷³

The scenes of brutality continue with the slaves, weeping all the way, being marched through the interior of the continent until they reach the coast. Here Roscoe addresses the reader directly, calling for a strong—and a sentimental—emotional response to the description he has just offered. ‘Let the cheek with burning blushes glow’, he demands, ‘and pity pour her tears’. By now the reader has experienced several pages of the most unimaginable cruelties being perpetrated on people who have been consistently represented as men and women of feeling, that is, as sentimental heroes. If they are men and women of feeling themselves they should already be weeping. If not, this is the moment where emotional involvement is demanded as an unconditional requirement of reading the poem. Having reached this climax, and having emotionally subverted the reader’s intellect, Roscoe immediately turns to the political question of a possible consumer boycott of sugar, exposing the hypocrisy of those who know about the barbarities of slavery ‘yet partake / The luxuries it supplies’. He concludes with a rallying call to those who are aware of the inhumanity of the slave trade, yet do nothing to oppose it:

Shall these not feel

The keen emotions of remorse and shame?

And learn this truth severe, that whilst they shun

The glorious conflict, nor assist the cause

Of suffering nature, **THEY PARTAKE THE GUILT?**⁷⁴

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Roscoe has moved from several pages of sentimentalised narration, through an appeal to the reader's own sentiments, to a demand that they become politically involved. This demand comes at a point in the narrative when the reader is least able to resist it because their 'tender emotions' have been addressed by stories of sentimental heroes represented in sentimental parables. The reader's emotions have been clearly manipulated and their intellect subverted. This is the rhetoric of sensibility being used directly and unequivocally for political ends. Roscoe knew that the pro-slavery camp was attacking the abolitionist cause through its poems and that one of the chief complaints they made was that the poems were the sentimentalised, domestic productions of 'tender-hearted poetesses'. By beginning his poem with a critique of sentimentality he set out on the offensive. Roscoe sought to distance himself from those poetesses and that level of criticism, but for all his denials his poem, like almost all the poems of the anti-slavery movement, makes considerable use of the rhetoric of sensibility.

The reviewers were clear that this poem would have a strong effect on the feelings of its readers and, in the main, were supportive both of the views expressed and the manner in which they were expressed. *The Monthly Review* thought that 'the poet, in order to produce the strongest impressions on the imagination and feelings of his readers, has only to follow the track of the historian, and clothe plain facts in the dress of simple and easy verse'.* As we have seen they were clear in their praise for Roscoe's ability to perform this task. *The Critical Review*, however, had a more strongly sentimental approach to the poem. In a long review they argued that the poem 'demands the applause of every candid and philanthropic mind', but they continued with an appeal to a self-interested sensibility which is highly revealing:

To our West-India planters, in whom the spark of humanity is not absolutely extinguished, we recommend the following lines. They carry conviction with them, and will, we trust, be read by no feeling mind without a wish at least of alleviating the miseries of these unhappy fellow-creatures. Exclusive of higher

* Monthly Review, 78 (1798), 140.

obligations, there must surely result from acts of benevolence towards them an internal satisfaction, which their oppressor can never experience.⁷⁵

This passage is followed by a long quotation from the poem. The quotation includes three lines which compare the slaves' capacity to feel with the unfeeling response of Europeans involved in the slave trade;

Form'd with the same capacity of pain
 The same desire of pleasure and of ease
 Why feels not man for man?

These lines advance the well-established sentimental argument that equality of feeling proves the equality of all mankind. *The Critical Review's* response to it is another sort of argument altogether, an argument which harks back to that made by Sir George Ellison in Sarah Scott's novel. There Sir George, to justify to his wife his kind treatment of his slaves, 'owned a delight which nothing in this world can afford, but the relieving our fellow creatures from misery'. This 'delight' (though merely an 'internal satisfaction' according to *The Critical Review*) was one of the rewards for benevolence promised by many sentimental writers. It is a self-interested argument which is why it is one of the characteristics of the discourse of sensibility to come under increasing criticism as the century progressed. Paradoxically Roscoe, who tried so hard in his poem to guard against accusations of false or merely self-serving sensibility, has his poem promoted by *The Critical Review* in the very terms which he sought hard to avoid.

As we have seen, between the years 1787 and 1794 well over one hundred poems which dealt with slavery and the slave trade were published, either separately, as part of a collection, or in the pages of newspapers and magazines. No comprehensive study has yet been made of the fugitive pieces which appeared in periodical publications and it is possible that a thorough search might turn up hundreds more. From amongst those published in the pages of *The Gentleman's*

⁷⁵ *Critical Review*, 64 (1787), 149-50.

Magazine an extract from just one is sufficient to illustrate the variety of light, sentimental, yet politically engaged verse which became associated with the abolition movement. Charles Dibdin's 'Negro Love-Elegy' is one of these. It had originally appeared in fragments in a comic opera he had written in 1780 but was reprinted whole in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1792.⁷⁶ Written in a supposed African or Caribbean dialect (which really only consists of the substitution of [d] for [ð] and of [t] for [θ] combined with some licence over pronouns), it imagines the elegy of an African woman whose lover has been killed in battle. It starts peacefully enough:

When Yancoo dear fight far away,
 Some token kind me send;
 One branch of olive, for dat say,
 'Me wish de battle end!'

De poplar tremble while him go,
 Say, 'Of dy life take care!'
 Me send no laurel, for me know
 Of dat he find him share.

De ivy say, 'My heart be true;'
 'Me droop,' say willow-tree;
 De torn, he say 'Me sick for you!'
 De sunflower, 'Tink of me.'

This 'elegant morceau', as it is introduced in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, continues with the woman's realisation that Yancoo, her lover, has died in battle. She takes solace in the recognition that trees and flowers gain new vigour from a shower of rain—and so resolves to seek comfort in a shower of tears. The

⁷⁶ Charles Dibdin, 'A Negro Love-Elegy', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 62, II (1792), 652. The poem is printed anonymously. However, a note on p. 1235 of the magazine attributes this poem to 'Mr. Dibdin in his opera *The Islanders*'. The opera has not survived in its entirety although the 'air' by Orra appears in Charles Dibdin, *Songs, Duets, Trios, &c. in The Islander, a Comic Opera in Three Acts* (London: G. Kearsly, 1780), p. 6 and p. 26.

botanical metaphor is an extended one in this poem but it is significant that all the plants mentioned are European species, each with a particular cultural signification of its own. The olive branch in the first stanza is a peace offering. In the second stanza the poplar is associated with the Hercules's descent into the underworld while the laurel is a symbol of victory. The ivy, willow, and thorn in the third stanza represent everlasting life, weeping, and affliction respectively, although the symbolic meaning of the sunflower is unclear. This is a love-elegy of an African very well versed in European botany and symbolism. Indeed, if we 'translate' the poem into standard English and replace Yancoo and Orra with European names we would be left with a poem with no reference to Africa or Africans whatsoever. The poem concludes in a similar vein, but this time it takes a sharp turn towards the sentimental. The bereaved Orra is contemplating the many trees and flowers which surround her when she receives consolation from a shower of rain:

I see fore now, de tree, de flower,
 He droop like Orra surely,—
 And den by'm bye dere com a shower,
 He hold him head up purely.

And so sometime me tink me die,
 My heart so sick he grieve me;
 But in a lilly time me cry
 Good deal—and dat relieve me.

The story is a quintessentially sentimental one. It focuses on Orra's grief and the method by which she overcomes it. A perfectly everyday occurrence—a shower of rain—rejuvenates the wilting plants around her. Inspired by this she too produces a shower, though in her case a shower of tears, and through her tears she finds relief. Dibdin has taken as his subject a private response to a public tragedy—the death of a warrior—but while Yancoo might be a hero, the real 'hero' of this poem is Orra. She is clearly a sentimental heroine, finding strength in tears to bear her through her bereavement. This is characteristic of the sentimental which tends to

privilege the domestic world while distancing the world of public affairs. It is also a characteristic of sentimental rhetoric to find an individual or private story of woe—a sentimental parable—and to invite the reader to draw a large public moral from it. Nowhere in this poem is there a direct political message or call for support. In 1780, when it was first performed on stage, there was no coherent political campaign calling for the abolition of slavery or the slave trade. However, by 1792, when it appeared in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, there was little need for a direct political message. The simple assertion of the humanity of an African woman, when combined with 'proof' of that woman's depth of feeling, was enough to position the poem as an abolitionist one. Despite the magazine's pro-slavery editorial policy, sentimental poetry continued to provide its readers with abolitionist rhetoric. Indeed, it was the only abolitionist rhetoric on its pages.

Drama

Charles Dibdin's *The Islanders* cannot be said to have been either the greatest or the most popular play of the eighteenth century. In the opinion of Wylie Sypher the latter distinction went to Nicholas Rowe's *The Tragedy of Jane Shore* (1714). The second most popular play, he argues, was *The Tragedy of Oroonoko*, a dramatisation of Aphra Behn's novel of 1688. There were several versions of *Oroonoko*. The first, by Thomas Southerne, appeared in 1696 and substantially altered much of Behn's novel. The language is much more suggestive (the later eighteenth century found it indecent) and a comic sub-plot is introduced. In an attempt to clean up an act which, in the opinion of an increasingly genteel audience, was becoming less respectable a new adaptation was written by John Hawkesworth in 1759.⁷⁷ The suggestiveness was toned down, much of the humour was pruned away and in many places the sentimental language of the

⁷⁷ The first editions are: Thomas Southerne, *Oroonoko: A Tragedy As it is Acted at the Theatre-Royal, By His Majesty's Servants* (London: H. Playford, B. Tooke and S. Buckley, 1696) and *Oroonoko, a Tragedy, as it is now Acted at the Theatre-royal in Drury Lane by His Majesty's Servants, by Thomas Southern, with Alterations* [by John Hawkesworth] (London: C. Bathurst, 1759).

domestic interior replaced that of the bawdy house. As one might expect, Sypher disapproves of this development and, in a study of the prologues to the two versions, he notes that while ‘the first urges the audience to relish the comedy; by 1759, the address is to sentiment’. This sentiment does, he admits, have a rhetorical purpose and he argues that ‘even before the years of anti-slavery, tears were doubtless shed for Oroonoko’s plight’, largely because Hawkesworth’s sentimental version of the play became the standard version.

Most of the tears shed for slaves by eighteenth-century theatre-goers would have been brought forth by Hawkesworth’s version of *Oroonoko*. However, the story of Oroonoko and Imoinda in any version long predates the emergence of an organised anti-slavery movement just as it also predates the development of popular anti-slavery sentiment. Moreover, the kind of tears brought forth by Hawkesworth’s *Oroonoko* were probably those criticised by Roscoe when he eulogised Humanity and complained:

Of crowded theatres, where in thy place
Sits Sensibility, with wat’ry eye,
Dropping o’er fancied woes her useless tear.

Hannah More expresses her enthusiasm for Southerne’s play (she neglects to mention which version) in *Slavery* and the play continued to be popular well into the nineteenth century. However, abolitionist writers of the 1780s and 1790s had a much clearer idea of the wrongs which needed to be addressed than either Behn, Southerne, or Hawkesworth. While there are insufficient surviving plays for us to be able to speak confidently of a ‘drama of anti-slavery’ in the period, there are a number of plays which appeared largely as a result of the abolition movement. Two of these are Thomas Bellamy’s *The Benevolent Planters* (1789) and Kotzebue’s *The Negro Slaves* which, although originally written in German, appeared in English translation in 1796.

The Benevolent Planters is a sentimental play but it is less clear how far it is an abolitionist play.⁷⁸ Sypher characteristically argues that ‘few works are more drenched with sentimentality; possibly a complete drama of anti-slavery would have been more enervating than anti-slavery verse.’⁷⁹ He does not, however, stop to consider whether the play is clearly abolitionist or merely re-articulating the well trodden ameliorationist arguments of the 1760s and 1770s. The play, as Sypher notes, owes something to *Oroonoko* although it is considerably shorter and simpler. The Jamaican planters Goodwin and Heartfree discover that amongst their slaves are the lovers Oran and Selima who have been separated by ‘the fate of war’ and who believe each other to be dead. The planters decide to reunite the lovers but wait until a festival takes place to do so, for no apparent reason other than their own sense of drama. At the festival Oran appears uninterested in the games because of his deep melancholy and so Selima is produced to general acclaim and the lovers’ mutual happiness. The slaves are granted their freedom and then a finale ensues in which a new song to the tune of *Rule Britannia* is performed. Bizarrely this new song *removes* all references to slavery from what is already a song proclaiming freedom and resisting slavery, albeit in a Whiggish rather than an abolitionist mode.

The motives of the planters are ostensibly presented as benevolent, as the title suggests. A closer reading shows that they might be moved by more mercenary considerations. Heartfree laments (or complains) of Oran that ‘his sorrow for Selima is so deeply rooted in his feeling bosom, that I fear I shall soon lose an excellent domestic’. Goodwin notes that a similar fate is overtaking Selima: ‘inward grief has preyed upon her mind’, he tells Heartfree, ‘and like her faithful Oran, she is bending to her grave’.⁸⁰ They resolve to reunite the lovers but the delay they create merely highlights the fact that Oran and Selima are the planters’ slaves, to be separated or reunited at the pleasure or even, as it turns out, for the

⁷⁸ It was performed twice, on 5 August and 10 August 1789, at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket. See *The London Stage, Part 5: 1776-1800*, 3 vols, ed. Charles Beecher Hogan (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), II, p. 1175.

⁷⁹ Sypher, p. 244.

⁸⁰ Thomas Bellamy, *The Benevolent Planters. A Dramatic Piece, as performed at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket* (London: J. Debrett, 1789), p. 4.

amusement of their owners. At the end of the play the lovers are granted their freedom but the power structures of the plantation are left unchanged as Oran subjects himself voluntarily to servitude:

O my masters! for such, though free, suffer me still to call you; let my restored partner and myself bend to such exalted worth; while for ourselves, and for our surrounding brethren, we declare, that you have proved yourselves *The Benevolent Planters*, and that under subjection like yours
 SLAVERY IS BUT A NAME.⁸¹

The moral would seem to be not that slavery as a system is objectionable but merely that harsh and unfeeling slave-owners should change their ways. Indeed, the play seems to be a crude return to the ameliorationist writing which began to appear twenty-five years previously. Its power as sentimental rhetoric is somewhat suspect as well. While Oran and to a lesser extent Selima are sentimental heroes they are also more closely modelled on the primitivist figures of *Oroonoko*. The planters are ostensibly sentimental heroes as well but their benevolence and, indeed, their sensibility is too shot through with self-interest to be convincing. A number of sentimental arguments are hinted at, and these include the theory of equality of feeling and the notion that a man of feeling (Oran in this case) may well be brought to the grave by the strength of his emotional suffering. These arguments are not well developed and would have been unlikely to convince the sceptic. The story itself is too complex to be a sentimental parable, while being too short to contain any. The only level on which this play can be said to offer a sentimental rhetoric is that by its use of a rather clichéd language of feeling it attempts to bring tears to the eyes of the most feeling of its audience. One suspects that in a few cases it may have succeeded in emotionally subverting the intellect, but without having a strong political point to follow through on this achievement, it falls short of being a good, or even a competent, example of the rhetoric of sensibility.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Appearing in 1796, some years after the peak in abolitionist literature, is *The Negro Slaves (Die Negersklaven)* by the German August Friedrich Ferdinand von Kotzebue. The play is dedicated to William Wilberforce, whose fame extended beyond the shores of Great Britain as both an abolitionist and a model of conservative reform. It was translated anonymously, but faithfully, into English in the year that it was first published in Germany. Kotzebue is now best remembered in English speaking countries for *The Lover's Vows* (originally *Das Kind der Liebe*) which was written in 1798 and translated by Elizabeth Inchbald and others in that year.⁸² This was the play which was considered rather improper by Fanny Price, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814).⁸³ Her doubts about the play may have been, as is usually suggested, that it dealt with matters such as bastardy and coquetry, which could not be discussed by a mixed group without some sense of impropriety. Likely too was her fear that the slave-owning Sir Thomas Bertram, away visiting his plantations in Antigua, would have disapproved of his family performing a play by a well known abolitionist.

The Negro Slaves appears not to have been publicly performed in Britain, but it was available to be read and it is uncompromising in its abolitionism.⁸⁴ It is a play which makes considerable use of the rhetoric of sensibility, signalled in the author's preface where Kotzebue relates that he 'is not ashamed to confess that while he was writing this piece he shed a thousand tears. Should his readers or spectators mix their tears with his, his labour would then have some reward'.⁸⁵ This demand for the reader to weep and the insistence that mere weeping will justify and advance the political position being promoted is itself a form of sentimental rhetoric. Specifically it is a sentimental argument in which the sympathetic affinity which runs from the author to the reader, via the characters of the play, is

⁸² August Friedrich Ferdinand von Kotzebue, *Lover's Vows*, trans. Elizabeth Inchbald (London: n.p., 1798). Also available were *Lover's Vows, or, the Child of Love*, trans. Stephen Porter (London: n.p., 1798) and *The Natural Son; a play in five acts... being the original of Lovers' Vows*, trans. Anne Plumtre (London: R. Phillips, 1798).

⁸³ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814), ed. Tony Tanner (London: Penguin, 1966).

⁸⁴ It is not mentioned in *The London Stage*.

⁸⁵ August Friedrich Ferdinand von Kotzebue, *The Negro Slaves, a Dramatic-Historical Piece, in Three Acts. Translated from the German of the President De Kotzebue* (London: T. Cadell, Jr., and W. Davies, 1796), p. viii.

highlighted and advertised. The author has offered a mechanism by which the play can be read or spectated and is demanding, in sentimental terms, that the reader shows him political solidarity by 'mixing' his tears with their own. This strategy is also used within the text of the play, and this chapter will conclude with an examination of a notable example of sentimental rhetoric which, in a few short lines, makes use of all of the main tropes of that rhetoric.

The play is a complex one, rendered even more complicated by its choice of two alternative endings, one happy and one tragic. It tells the story of John and William, two European brothers in Jamaica. John is a brutal and callous slave owner while William is a sentimental hero in every respect. John plans to rape Ada, a slave and the innocent young wife of Zameo, the Oroonoko-like African hero who is also enslaved. In a further complication Zameo's father, the aged and despairing Ayos, has sold himself into slavery in order to see his son once more before he dies. In the happy ending William buys the lovers from his brother and sets them free. The tragic ending has Zameo murdering his wife to protect her virtue, then killing himself. Much of the play is taken up with conversations between John and William in which despite William's pleading John determines to press on with his evil plan. William, meanwhile, becomes known by the slaves who recognise his benevolent character and seek his protection. In the following scene a group of slaves are talking when they see William walk out of an arbour;

ALL There he is! (They jump up and surround him) Be thou our master!

WILLIAM I thank you, my children! I will endeavour to mend your lot.

NEGRO God bless you!

WILLIAM Would it were in my power to do you much good!

NEGRO We are already comforted by what you say.

ANOTHER And because your benevolent eyes say a great deal more.

THIRD See brothers, he weeps!

ALL (Pressing round him) He weeps! He weeps over our wretchedness.

WILLIAM Have hope, poor men! It will be better with you. There lives a man in England who loves you, who is day and night meditating your

relief, and who, warmed with the glorious fire of philanthropy, defends your rights with fervid eloquence.

THE NEGROES Blessings light on that good man, who is a stranger to us!

ANOTHER Tell us his name.

WILLIAM His name is WILBERFORCE.⁸⁶

This short extract makes use of almost all the tropes of sentimental rhetoric. In the first place it concerns a sentimental hero (William) going amongst other sentimentalists (the slaves). In a familiar sentimental argument a sympathetic bond is quickly established between them, at first by William's verbal declaration of his patriarchal duties and later through the non-verbal communication established by his tears. It is these tears which impress the slaves and convince them (and the audience) of William's honesty and benevolence. This is also a sentimental parable in that it tells the story of how a display of emotion, particularly an effusion of tears, demonstrates genuine feeling to the world. The reader is implicitly encouraged to behave in like manner. However, this passage relies for the most part on that most fundamental and widespread form of sentimental persuasion, the emotional subversion of the intellect, which is here used in several of its most effective forms.

As we saw in Chapter Two, there are two main varieties of sentimental emotional subversion. The first, and simplest, occurs when rational proofs are dismissed in favour of emotional ones. The second occurs when emotional arguments are used to alter the mood in which a reader or listener receives a reasoned argument. Kotzebue uses both of these. In this extract William's tears count for far more than his declarations of benevolence, just as his namesake William Wilberforce is 'warmed with the glorious fire of philanthropy' rather than inspired by the philosophical language of the rights which he seeks to defend with 'fervid eloquence'. Rational proofs are dismissed in favour of emotional ones. This is not enough, however, and in this extract the political argument and the identification of the living sentimental hero come after a sentimental passage in which tears are

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

flowing. Kotzebue had made it plain in his preface that he hoped readers or spectators would be moved to tears themselves and William's exchange with the slaves would appear to be just such a moment. Having reduced his audience to tears (if all went to plan) Kotzebue then introduces the political material of the scene. A philanthropic man in England, we are reminded, who loves slaves and is moved by a benevolent zeal, is working day and night for their relief. The audience may have been expected to have realised that Wilberforce was the subject here but just in case they were not able to recall his name they are reminded of it, although not before a crucial interjection by 'The Negroes' who remark in unison; 'Blessings light on that good man, who is a stranger to us!' Here is an economical restatement of the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Biblical parable which more than any other could be adapted to articulate sentimental notions of benevolence, coming at the end of an increasingly emotional scene. The 'Samaritan' is identified as Wilberforce and by extension the entire anti-slavery project is given a divine stamp of approval. It would have been almost impossible for an eighteenth-century spectator, fully experienced in sentimental literature, not to find some support in their heart for Wilberforce and his project after witnessing this scene in a crowded and emotionally charged theatre.

Chapter 4

The Pamphlet War of the 1780s

This chapter examines the use of sentimental rhetoric in a number of pro and anti-slavery pamphlets and essays of the 1780s, including those by three African writers: Ignatius Sancho, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano. It shows how techniques and arguments developed in sentimental poems, plays, and novels were adapted for use by the pamphleteers of the 1780s, but stops short of discussing in detail texts produced after news of the French and Haitian revolutions had begun to make an impact on British political thought. This is largely because the nature of political debate, and the nature of the anti-slavery debate, was so fundamentally altered by these events that a proper analysis is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Until the last quarter of the eighteenth century slavery was rarely considered as a political or legal question and those writers who chose to criticise the institution confined their discussion, in the main, to the pages of novels, poems, and plays. Here a concern for the well-being of slaves could be lauded by readers and critics—and even on occasion slave-owners—as a demonstration of benevolence and fine feeling. As we saw in Chapter Three anti-slavery sentiment was expressed in a number of literary publications in the years leading up to the abolition campaign of the 1780s and 1790s and this sentiment could vary from the merely ameliorationist desire to see the slaves treated with greater humanity to outright hostility to slavery. In this respect writers of ‘literature’ were in the vanguard of the abolition movement. However, for a debate to become truly political in the eighteenth century it would have to be discussed far more widely than solely in the pages of literary texts. It would, to go ‘mainstream’, need to become a concern of the newspapers and the political tracts and pamphlets.

Political debate in the eighteenth century was conducted through a variety of media. While some in the upper echelons of society could count upon family members

who sat in the either of the houses of Parliament as a source of political information, for most people newspapers, tracts, and pamphlets were the main source of information, views, and debate. The role of newspapers in political debate will be examined in some depth in Chapter Five; here the focus is on those occasional publications which appeared when a topic was in the public eye or which sometimes played a significant part in bringing topics into the public sphere. Political writing predated printing, of course, but the advent of print culture meant that political views could be disseminated more widely than at any point previously. Renaissance 'blasts' and 'counterblasts' paved the way while the civil war period saw a proliferation of often unregulated presses producing views which varied from the rational and enduring to the barely sane. Censorship was re-imposed by Cromwell, and maintained by the governments of the restored monarchy, but it was never again possible, or even desirable, to stifle all political debate. ^{lapse of the} With the Licensing Act in 1695, censorship was largely abandoned. Moreover, increasing literacy and competition alongside slow but steady technological advances combined to lower the cost of print throughout the eighteenth century and extend the market for political publications of all hues and in all forms. As Kathleen Wilson has argued there was:

A marked diversification of political ephemera for predominantly urban residents in the decades between 1735 and 1765 to include not only sermons, pamphlets, ballads and broadsides but also handbills, newspapers, tracts and prints, worked to give such publications salience within the arenas of sociability of provincial towns.¹

This was truer even of London than the provincial towns. In the capital the sociable 'arenas of club, coffeehouse, tavern and library' were sometimes distinguishable and sometimes not. London printers had operated from taverns from the earliest period of printing. In the eighteenth century coffee houses and taverns lent, rented, and sold newspapers and pamphlets as well as offering a

¹ Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 37.

location for the ensuing discussions, a state of affairs which has led Jürgen Habermas to argue that the coffee house was one of the basic institutions of the developing 'public sphere'. In his view the largely bourgeois literary community which initially met at coffee houses were soon joined by the nobility with the result that 'critical debate ignited by works of literature and art was soon extended to include economic and political disputes'.² This view has come in for some detailed examination but it may be significant to note that the Habermas model here mirrors the migration in the 1780s of anti-slavery writing from a largely 'literary' to a largely 'political' arena. There was a sharp increase in publication of slavery-related texts during the mid-1780s. Many of these were poems and novels but many more were essays, sermons, tracts, and pamphlets. Anti-slavery had 'arrived' as a political force and in this chapter we will examine those writings which were the expression of this new political movement.

James Ramsay's 'Essay'

Although Ignatius Sancho thought that the works produced by Granville Sharp in the 1760s and 1770s were 'of consequence to every one of humane feelings', few of the small number of anti-slavery pamphlets written before the early 1780s made much use of the rhetoric of sensibility.³ This state of affairs was reversed after the publication, in 1784, of James Ramsay's *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies*. With the appearance of this book the British reading public were for the first time presented with an anti-slavery work by a mainstream Anglican writer who had personally witnessed slavery in the British Caribbean plantations. For the first time the plantation owners themselves felt sufficiently threatened by an anti-slavery text to line up behind several vitriolic and often highly personal refutations of Ramsay's arguments. Granville Sharp had laid many harsh facts before the reading public but it was Ramsay who initiated a

² Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 33.

³ *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African* (1782), ed. Vincent Carretta (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 164.

dialogue. Despite the ferocity of the attacks made on it there was little in Ramsay's *Essay* which had not been said before and much that is said over and over again in the years which followed. However, a substantial portion of the slavery debate in the 1780s centred on Ramsay's work and although the arguments which were endlessly advanced and countered may have differed little in substance throughout the decade, Ramsay's tone was widely imitated. This was to have an important effect on the way the debate was conducted as Ramsay was the first anti-slavery campaigner to use a significant quantity of sentimental rhetoric in his political writings.

Ramsay was born at Fraserburgh in 1733 and educated at King's College, Aberdeen between 1750 and 1755. He entered the navy in 1757 as a surgeon but, an injury disqualifying him from further service, he took holy orders in the Anglican church and settled into a living on the Caribbean island of St Christopher (now usually known as St Kitts). Along with his pastoral duties Ramsay practised medicine, but the cash value of his living was derived from the sugar plantations—worked by slaves—which were attached to the church. Ramsay immediately welcomed all of his parishioners, black and white, into his church and set out to convert the slaves to Christianity. Moreover, he strongly criticised the planters for their cruel treatment of the slaves and in real life initiated many of the measures which the fictional Mr Ellison had put into practice on his estate. In the novel Ellison's ameliorationist programme was generally imitated but in the real world humane treatment of slaves could fail to influence. The planters resented Ramsay's interference, as they saw it, in the running of their lawful businesses and he soon came under attack. Letters were written to local newspapers, an angry notice was pinned to the church door, and his church was boycotted. Exhausted by the conflict Ramsay quitted St. Christopher in 1777. He briefly accepted a naval chaplaincy before returning in 1779 in the hope that the animosity against him might have subsided. It had not and so he returned to Britain in 1781, taking with him his personal servant, a black slave called Nestor. The following three years were spent writing the *Essay* which was published in the summer of 1784. This event immediately embroiled Ramsay in pamphlet debate with various agents and

supporters of the West-India Interest. The debate brought him a measure of fame and influence—he was invited to dine with the Prime Minister on several occasions—but it had a more lasting effect in that it set the tone for the slavery debate. Despite Ramsay's importance to the movement he did not live to see its fruition. He died in 1789, a few months after his portrait was painted by Carl Frederik von Breda.⁴ [Figure 5]

Ramsay's *Essay* introduced sentimental rhetoric as a substantial part of the armoury of abolitionist tract and pamphlet writers and yet it is not an overtly sentimental work. Rather, Ramsay sets out to discuss slavery under various headings and in various styles, which gives the *Essay* something of an eclectic appearance. Ramsay writes about the history of slavery in the style of an historian, about the economics of slavery in the style of the new political economists, about the theology of slavery in the style of an Anglican clergyman, and about the humanity of slavery in the style of a sentimental novelist. Long before he chooses to deploy his sentimental rhetoric, Ramsay shows that he intends to be rigorous and scholarly. His descriptions of the daily routine of plantation slaves are meticulous on the one hand, while on the other hand he shows that he is prepared to take on some of the most celebrated thinkers of his age. In particular he launches an attack on David Hume when, in the style of a philosopher, he attacks Hume's notorious footnote to his essay 'Of National Characters'. Hume had said:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites [...] in JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.⁵

⁴ The only full length biography is Folarin Shyllon, *James Ramsay: The Unknown Abolitionist* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1977). This has Ramsay firmly canonised amongst the 'Saints' and casts Wilberforce as a self-interested villain. The biography in the DNB, written by James Ramsay Macdonald, is also useful. (There is no evidence to suggest that Ramsay and MacDonald were in any way related).

⁵ David Hume, 'Of National Characters', *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (1777), ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), p. 208n.

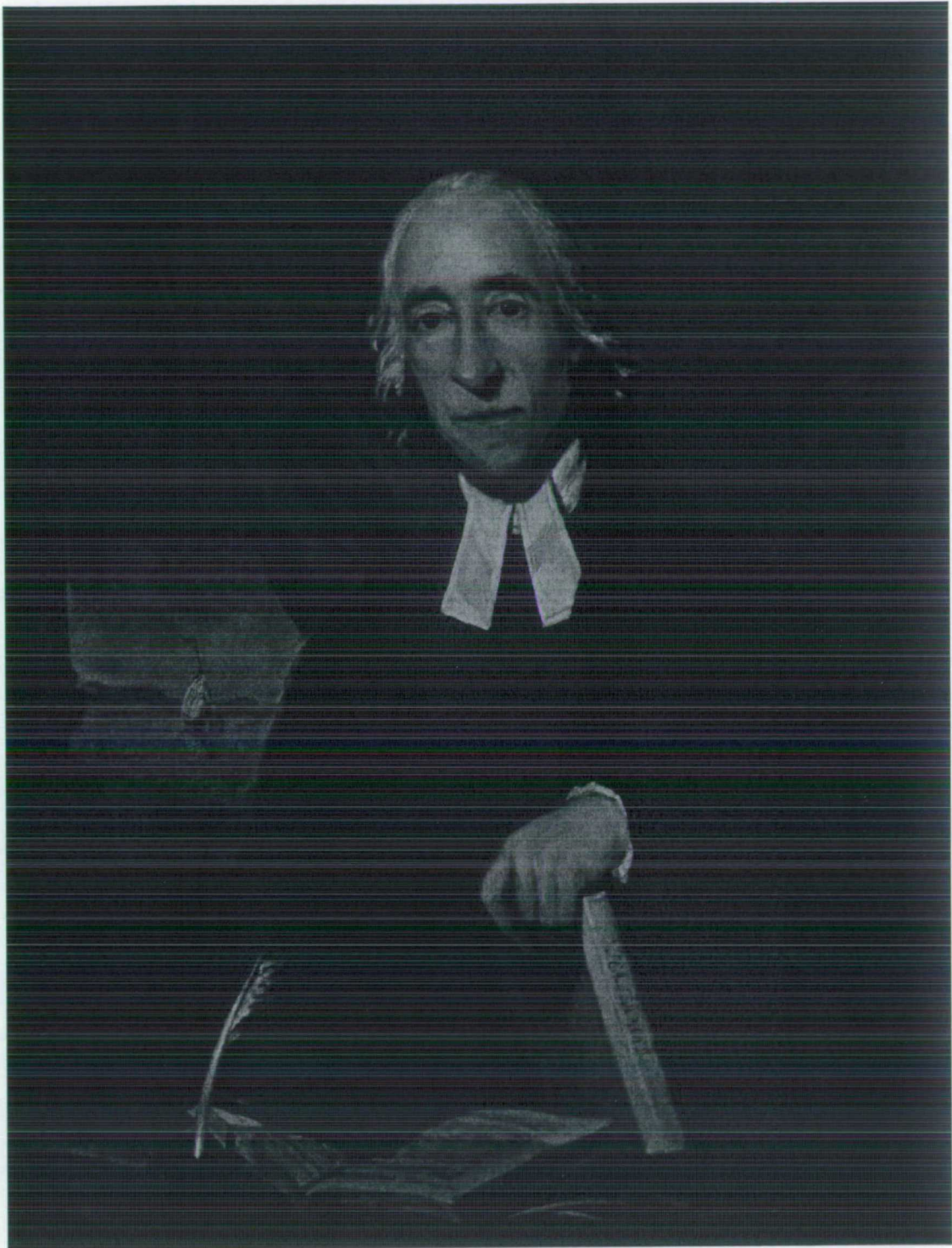


Figure 5

James Ramsay in 1789, painted by Carl Frederik von Breda

This opinion, in Ramsay's view, was 'made without any competent knowledge of the subject' and would 'appear to have no foundation, either in reason or nature'. Worse still, Ramsay found 'something so degrading in all Hume's philosophy, as can recommend it only to a corrupt heart, and a vitiated understanding, which sees nothing to wish for, or excite their emulation, out of the circle of animal indulgencies'. The attack is derived in part from the commonplace Anglican opinion that Hume's atheism rendered his philosophy immoral and invalid. Ramsay's views on Hume may also have been influenced by his close personal friendship with Thomas Reid, the 'common-sense' philosopher who was Hume's best known critic. Far more effective, however, was Ramsay's suggestion that Hume, another Scot, was in a position to dispense his philosophy purely by an act of good fortune (or divine will). Ramsay suggests that had Hume 'lived in the days of Augustus, or even but a thousand years ago, his northern pride, perhaps, would have been less aspiring, and satisfied to have been admitted even on a footing of equality with the sable Africans.'⁶ In late-eighteenth-century Britain the Scots were seen by many English people as an inferior race and the satire therefore positions Hume in the place where he had himself positioned people of African descent. Ramsay is thus able to deliver a short sermon on pride, combined with a stiff reminder that every nation and race is equal before God and equally likely to rise and fall through the course of history. Hume has no more need to be proud of his origins than anyone else, black or white.

Disputations such as this one take up a considerable part of Ramsay's *Essay* and much of what remains is concerned with a detailed description of a day in the life of plantation slaves.⁷ This, though likely to attract the attentions of philanthropists, is not written in particularly sentimental or even emotional language, the idea being that the facts will speak for themselves. Slavery, Ramsay says, 'needs only to be laid open or exposed in its native colours, to command the abhorrence and opposition of every man of feeling and sentiment'.⁸ This strategy

⁶ James Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (London: J. Phillips, 1784), pp. 198-201.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-101.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

informed the work of most of the abolitionists, with few believing that slavery could remain legal once it was in the public eye. Later, this view, considerably refined by Thomas Clarkson, was to become the orthodox explanation for the upsurge in anti-slavery feeling in the 1780s, with early abolitionists such as Ramsay and Sharp being celebrated as 'those who brought the subject more or less into view'.⁹ However, Ramsay is quite clear that bringing slavery to public attention is likely to mobilise the opposition not of the general public but, more specifically, 'of every man of feeling and sentiment'. For this reason he seems quite deliberately to apply himself to rousing the sensibility of these men of feeling. After forty pages of minute detail of the slaves' daily sufferings he switches style, invoking an angry and ostensibly anti-sentimental rhetoric which is designed not only to bring forth the reader's indignation but to shame any reader who has not yet brought forth a tear of their own. It is a long passage, but worth quoting from at length, starting here from about half way through:

Let us imagine (and would Heaven it were only imagination!) masters and overseers, with up-lifted whips, clanking chains, and pressing hunger, forcing their forlorn slaves to commit every horrid crime that virtue shrinks at, and with the same weapons punishing the perpetration, not to the extremity indeed that nature can bear, but till the whole man shrinks under them. But to make the representation complete, we must also draw humanity, bleeding over the horrid scene, and longing, eagerly longing, to be able to vindicate her own rights. Still, whatever she may urge, it will have little weight, if avarice or luxury oppose her claim. We are exceedingly ready, it is the turn of the age, to express ourselves sorrowfully, when any act of oppression, or unjust suffering, is related before us; the generous sentiment flows glibly off our tongues, charity seems to dictate every sympathizing phrase, and vanity comes cheerfully forward to make her offering. But whom shall we find willing to sacrifice his amusement or his pleasure, to obey the call of humanity? Who to relieve the sufferings of the wretched slave, will boldly encounter the

⁹ Thomas Clarkson, *History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1808), II, p. 32.

oppressor's rage, or offer up selfish interest at the altar of mercy? Why, then, hath the active zeal of the benevolent Mr. Granville Sharp, and a few others, in the business which we now agitate, hitherto made the unfeeling indifference of our age, and nation, but the more conspicuous?¹⁰

This is a sustained piece of rhetoric making use of sentimental arguments and language to aim at the emotional subversion of the intellect and concluding with the introduction of a sentimental hero. The first sentence seizes on a few fleeting, though powerful, images of cruelty to focus the mind of the reader. There is the orator's (or, indeed, the preacher's) delight in strong phrases, driving rhythms, and literary effects such as powerful alliteration. In this first sentence the reader is asked only to imagine concrete physical cruelty and abuse, dreadful enough though those might be. The second sentence moves away from this towards an argument which seems more at home in the sentimental poem than in the mouth of the preacher or the classical rhetorician as we are asked to imagine a personified Humanity 'bleeding over the horrid scene'. This is a paradigmatically sentimental effusion, an outpouring of emotion which here is represented by blood just as it is elsewhere more famously represented by tears. The figure of Humanity, though, is unable to take action but merely to mourn: she is 'longing, eagerly longing, to be able to vindicate her own rights', but is opposed by 'avarice' and 'luxury'. We may be moved by the rhetoric of suffering but we ought to be outraged by the impotence of Humanity to alleviate that suffering. This is where Ramsay turns the argument on his readers, as men and women of professed sensibility. 'It is the turn of the age, to express ourselves sorrowfully', he argues. We are clearly being asked to recognise our own sentimental propensities at this point, just at the moment at which our intellects have been emotionally subverted, and just as clearly we are expected to stand up as men and women of feeling, keen to show our emotional response to the suffering which Ramsay has delineated in the long chapters before and in the few short lines immediately preceding this reflection. Yes, we have suffered, in our imaginations, with the suffering slaves and yes, 'the generous sentiment flows glibly off our tongues' but, asks Ramsay, driving the nail

¹⁰ Ramsay, *Essay*, pp. 104-5.

a little closer home, 'whom shall we find willing to sacrifice his amusement or his pleasure, to obey the call of humanity?' At once our already emotionally subverted intellects are presented with the accusation of inaction and hypocrisy and our guilt is brought to the fore. It is us who must overcome our 'vanity' and take action, in the manner of Granville Sharp, a name known to most informed readers of 1784 and who is here held up as a sentimental hero.

Ramsay's appeal to the reader is no 'mere rant and rhapsodical effusion' as one of his critics suggested.¹¹ Rather, it is a closely worked out piece of rhetoric, utilising both the traditional skills of the orator and the more specialised skills of the sentimentalist. It is a measure of the passage's complexity that Ramsay combines sentimental imagery and arguments with an attack on false sentiment. At the same time that we are having our intellects emotionally subverted by the imagery of suffering we are being questioned about the nature of sensibility itself, specifically about its worth as a mode of expression if it is merely a mode of expression, unconnected to any actual humanitarian act in the real world. To persuade his readers Ramsay must tread a narrow path: if he pays too much attention to the reader's false sensibility he is likely to alienate the reader. Conversely, if he exonerates the reader and blames only unidentified third persons his readers will not feel any of the guilt necessary to spur them into action. Ramsay solves this problem by taking as a model neither himself nor his imagined reader. The series of rhetorical questions which conclude this passage refer to Granville Sharp and hold him up as the sentimental hero whose benevolence and zeal to alleviate suffering should be generally imitated. We have had our consciences pricked by a combination of classical and sentimental rhetoric. Now we are told whom we are to emulate.

Ramsay is writing in the consciousness that many of his readers will at least profess themselves men and women of sensibility. These readers are again targeted when, in a long chapter section, Ramsay tells a number of sentimental parables. This

¹¹ *An Answer to the Reverend James Ramsay's Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of Slaves, in the British Sugar Colonies. By Some Gentlemen of St. Christopher.* (Basseterre, St. Christopher: Edward L. Low, 1784), p. ii.

section; 'African Capacity Vindicated from Experience', is the fifth in a series debunking popular racist myths (although it often manages to substitute one myth for another). The first of these sentimental parables is designed to show that 'nothing in the turn or degree of [Africans'] mental faculties, distinguishes them from Europeans', and that 'in spite of the disadvantages under which they labour, individuals, on particular occasions, have shewn an elevation of sentiment that would have done honour to a Spartan'. The story concerns a slave named Quashi whom, we are told, 'was brought up in the family with his master' on the island of St Christopher. In later life Quashi 'retained for his master the tenderness that he had felt in childhood for his play-mate'. This tenderness seems to have been rather one sided. The master was 'inexorable when a fault was committed' and 'too apt to let prejudice usurp the place of proof.' Quashi, unable to 'exculpate himself to his satisfaction, for something done contrary to the discipline of the plantation, [...] was threatened with the ignominious punishment of the cart-whip'. He ran away, hoping to find another slave to approach the master and mediate for him, a practise which Ramsay suggests was widespread as it allowed 'an appearance of authority and discipline [to be] kept up, without the severity of it.' Unfortunately Quashi was discovered before this mediation process could begin and while running from his master he tripped, fell, then wrestled with him. Finally, having gained the upper hand, Quashi 'firmly seated on his master's breast' pulled out a knife and addressed his master thus:

'Master, I was bred up with you from a child; I was your play-mate when a boy; I have loved you as myself; your interest has been my study; I am innocent of the cause of your suspicion; had I been guilty, my attachment to you might have pleaded for me. Yet you have condemned me to a punishment, of which I must ever have borne the disgraceful marks; thus only can I avoid them.' With these words, he drew the knife with all his strength across his own throat, and fell down dead without a groan, on his master, bathing him in his blood

Had this man been properly educated; had he been taught his importance as a member of society; had he been accustomed to weigh his claim to, and

enjoy the possession of the unalienable rights of humanity; can any man suppose him incapable of making a progress in the knowledge of religion, in the researches of reason, or the works of art?¹²

There is a familiar ring to this story and more especially to the moral which Ramsay draws from it. Indeed, Ramsay himself notes the parallels with the story related by Addison in *The Spectator*, No. 215. In Addison's story, also set on the island of St. Christopher, two male slaves who are the best of friends fall in love with the same woman, another slave. Realising 'how impossible it was for either of them ever to be happy' they stab the women and then themselves. Addison sees a lesson in this;

We see, in this amazing Instance of Barbarity, what strange Disorders are bred in the Minds of those Men whose Passions are not regulated by Vertue, and disciplined by Reason. Though the Action which I have recited is in it self full of Guilt and Horror, it proceeded from a Temper of Mind which might have produced very noble Fruits, had it been informed and guided by a suitable Education.¹³

The message Ramsay derives from the Quashi story is plainly influenced by the message Addison read into his St Christopher story. Both are agreed that Africans have a 'natural nobility' which would be improved by a European style of education. Wylie Sypher notes similarities between the facts of the two stories as well, placing both within what he calls the 'noble Negro' tradition. The Addisonian story he calls 'The Legend of the Two Lovers' while 'The Legend of Quashy' he calls 'of less consequence but none the less contributory to the tradition of the noble Negro'.¹⁴ Sypher's scholarship is seriously at fault in his reading of the Quashi story. He gives as a source the Abbé Raynal's *History of the Two Indies* which had first appeared in 1774 and argues that the story 'becomes a set-piece in anti-slavery literature, and reappears in James Ramsay, Hannah More,

¹² Ramsay, *Essay*, pp. 246-53.

¹³ *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), II, pp. 338- 41.

¹⁴ Sypher, p. 143.

Samuel Jackson Pratt, and Herder's third *Negro-Idyl*.' To prove how easily legends become recycled as facts Sypher ends his discussion by quoting from Ramsay's explanation of how he knows the story to be genuine. In fact, Ramsay's *Essay* was the source for Raynal and all the other authors he mentions. Sypher's edition of Raynal was an English translation from 1788 which boasts in its introduction that 'the last edition of this work, published by the Abbé Raynal in ten volumes, being entirely new-modelled, the translation is in consequence almost totally a new work'. In the earlier editions, which Sypher was clearly unable to consult, the Quashi story simply does not appear.¹⁵ It seems likely that Ramsay was recounting a story which was essentially true. His moral, however, is taken straight from the pages of *The Spectator* and here what counts is Ramsay's wholehearted acceptance of the moral and intellectual framework behind the popular myth of the noble suicide of the noble slave, a myth which Aphra Behn had popularised in *Oroonoko*, which Addison had further advertised in *The Spectator*, and which Thomas Day had sentimentalised in *The Dying Negro*.

Quashi's story is a sentimental parable; a parable because it hints at a 'great truth' by showing a relatively small action, and sentimental because it specifically invites the reader to share emotionally in the suffering of another. It is odd, therefore, that this sort of tale, written in this kind of language, is to be found in a serious-minded political discussion of one of the most pressing economic and humanitarian issues of the day. Ramsay was aware that at least part of his readership would profess themselves men and women of sensibility. Moreover, he adopted different voices to fit the argument which he was conducting at the time. In this chapter section he deliberately targets the feeling reader and does so by painting vignettes of individual Africans who are noteworthy for some heroic or exemplary action. In Quashi's story one injustice is heaped upon another as the narrative moves

¹⁵ The first edition was: Guillaume Raynal, *Histoire Philosophique et Politique Des établissemens et du Commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, 8 vols (La Haye: n.p., 1774). The 'two lovers' section is at V, pp. 274-5. The first English edition was *A Philosophical and Political History of the settlements and trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies. Translated from the French of the Abbé Raynal*, trans. J. Justamond, 4 vols (London: Thomas Cadell, 1776). The edition Sypher uses is 'revised, augmented, and published in ten volumes' (London: A. Strahan and T. Cadell. 1788). The 'two lovers' and the 'Quashi' stories appear at VI, 308-311.

inexorably towards the tragic finale. The twist in the tale—that Quashi turns the knife on himself rather than on his master—elevates Quashi to a higher moral sphere and belittles the master whose petty vindictiveness is exposed. The story closes, as many sentimental stories do, with the symbolic outflow of bodily fluids. The master is left weltering in Quashi's blood but the sentimental reader is well aware that the alternative is for both to be bathed in tears of reconciliation. The only tears which are forthcoming here, though, are the tears of the reader.

Quashi's action is 'a refinement of sentiment, to which language cannot give a name'. We are to understand his actions as an example of an innate ability which, 'had this man been properly educated', could have been turned towards 'progress in the knowledge of religion, the researches of reason, or the works of art'.¹⁶ Quashi is held up as a model of the ideal eighteenth-century man of sensibility—a sentimental hero—who has merely missed out on a polite education. The 'other' of Ramsay's tale is not the African slave but the unsentimental and unsympathetic master. What man of sentiment could act so brutally to man who had been 'his play-fellow, from his childhood'? The master's treatment of Quashi invites comparison with Fielding's Blifil or Richardson's younger James Harlowe. Indeed, eighteenth-century literature is littered with orphans or those who have for one reason or another been rejected by their families. In almost every case an evil brother or step-brother is at hand to torment the hero or heroine. Quashi is clearly an orphan and so the master's behaviour towards him typecasts the master as a stock villain of the eighteenth-century novel and, in particular, the sentimental novels of the 1760-1780s. Taken together, the various elements of Ramsay's Quashi story add up to a powerful sentimental parable designed to engage the sympathy of the reader and to present the slave as more akin to the reader of sensibility than the brute unfeeling slave-driver.

Ramsay's next tale in this chapter section, another sentimental parable, 'is of a less awful nature, but will shew, that all the nobler qualities of the heart are not

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

monopolized by the white race'.¹⁷ Here Ramsay moves from the realm of physical action to the world of the financial transaction. The story concerns a certain Joseph Rachel who was 'a black trader in Barbadoes', with whom Ramsay claims he had often done business and whom he found 'remarkably honest and obliging'. Rachel's honesty is compared with all those in his trade as well as those of his race: 'his character was so fair, his manners so generous', Ramsay tells us, 'that the best people shewed him a regard, which they often deny men of their own colour, because not blessed with like goodness of heart.'¹⁸ The point of the story is to prove Rachel's 'goodness of heart' and to establish him as a sentimental hero. Ramsay explains that in 1756 a fire destroyed much of Bridgetown, although Rachel's area was spared. One man, in debt to Rachel, was not so lucky and lost everything which 'excited Joseph's compassion'. Taking this man's documents in hand:

Joseph held his bond for sixty pounds sterling. 'Unfortunate man,' says he, 'this shall never come against thee. Would heaven thou could settle all thy other matters as easily! But how am I sure that I shall keep in this mind: may not the love of gain, especially, when, by length of time, thy misfortune has become familiar to me, return with too strong a current, and bear down my fellow-feeling before it? But for this I have a remedy. Never shalt thou apply for the assistance of any friend against my avarice.' He got up, ordered a current account that the man had with him, to a considerable amount, to be drawn out, and in a whim that might have called up a smile on the face of charity, filled his pipe, sat down again, twisted the bond, and lighted his pipe with it. While the account was drawing out, he continued smoking, in a state of mind that a monarch might envy.

Rachel then went in search of his friend and presented him with the 'mutilated bond'. 'One may easily guess', says Ramsay, 'at the man's feelings, on being thus generously treated'. A paragraph later he asks 'will any man pretend to look down

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 253-4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

with contempt on one capable of such generosity, because the colour of his skin is black?'¹⁹

Sentimental heroes and heroines come in two basic guises: those who suffer, for whom we are to feel sympathy, and those who feel sympathy for the sufferings of others. The second group are role models for us to emulate. Quashi belongs more clearly with the first camp, while Rachel belongs to the second. Like Ramsay's portrayal of Quashi, the portrait of Rachel seems somewhat poeticised. The language is not that we would expect of any Barbados tradesman, black or white, while Rachel's short soliloquy is hardly the sort that we would expect to have been heard in public. The business with the pipe, allowing Ramsay to indulge in a quaint pun on the phrase 'drawing out', is too fortuitous to be convincing. The whole passage is rather too reminiscent of the sort of behaviour we would expect from Sterne's Uncle Toby, Mackenzie's Harley or Scott's Ellison.

That is not to say that the Joseph Rachel story is untrue. Rachel did exist and was a well known character in Bridgetown during the later part of his life. He was a prosperous businessman throughout the mid-eighteenth century and died around 1758, two years after the date of Ramsay's story.²⁰ There was a serious fire in Bridgetown on 8 February 1756 in which, according to a report in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, about 160 houses were destroyed.²¹ However, while likely to be substantially true the story has been turned into a 'heart-warming'—sentimental—parable by Ramsay for a direct polemical purpose. He has celebrated Rachel's immediate act of benevolence, while moving beyond the physical action of the charitable deed to a description of Rachel's internal emotional state, characterised as 'a state of mind that a monarch might envy.' The African, though not here a slave, is capable of a greatness of action which gives him a serenity of mind above that available to a monarch, the individual at the very top of the European social structure. But the comparison is not merely with that of the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 255-7.

²⁰ Jerome S. Handler, *The Unappropriated People: Freedmen in the Slave Society of Barbados* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 131.

²¹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 26 (1756), 205.

monarch; we too are invited to compare ourselves with Rachel. Whether or not we have ever behaved in a similar way his action is one which we would like to think we would emulate. Rachel is a sentimental and a benevolent hero, an ideal towards which we should all aspire. In this clever inversion of the accepted eighteenth-century image of the suffering African it is Rachel who is more likely to feel sympathy for us than us for Rachel. We could not dream of enslaving the benevolent Rachel. How, then, could we enslave others of his race?

Taken together Rachel and Quashi offer us two sides of the sentimental equation: the sufferer and the sympathiser. However, although presenting us with two heroes who could have stepped out of the pages of a sentimental novel, the Rachel and Quashi stories are presented as reportage and not fiction. These are true stories, enlisted by Ramsay in an attempt to show the character of the African, as he perceives it, in more than one light; to attempt to break the stereotype of Africans as lazy, unfeeling, and brutish or, indeed, as indistinguishable from one another. Both Quashi and Rachel are hard-working but, whereas Quashi is in servitude, Rachel is a successful businessman. Both Quashi and Rachel are feeling people. Quashi takes his own life both to avoid the shame of being whipped and to avoid showing ingratitude to a master who had been his childhood play-mate. Rachel is closely in touch with the feelings and sufferings of others at the economic level. However, in his attempt to break one stereotype Ramsay has imposed another. Africans are now to be considered as natural 'men of feeling'.

Primitivist writers of the later eighteenth century had somewhat haphazardly developed a set of theories which largely revolved around the notion that primitive people, less enervated by luxurious living, were not merely physically more hardy but were less morally corrupt than their modern or 'civilised' counterparts.²² They were also supposed more likely to be in touch with their fundamental 'human nature', living as they did in or close to the 'state of nature'. Primitivists who

²² This argument is most famously expressed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754), in trans. Donald A. Cress, *The Basic Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts; Discourse on the Origin of Inequality; Discourse on Political Economy; On the Social Contract* (Cambridge: Hackett, 1987).

subscribed to this theory were, by and large, taking sides in a hotly contested debate over whether the fundamental characteristic of human nature was altruism or selfishness. At the risk of over-simplification we can say that those writers who celebrated the simple but manly heroism of primitive peoples did so because they believed that, at their most basic level, human beings were sociable and altruistic creatures (despite their frequent participation in fierce battles). This belief is the essential point of contact between sentiment and primitivism and shows that in some measure the two discourses are not competing but complementary. In the literature of the later eighteenth century, exponents of the primitivist genre demonstrated the altruism of the 'uncivilised' while sentimentalists extolled the altruism of those who lived within the 'civilised' sphere.

Ramsay, in the chapter section under discussion here, recognises this point of connection. Though Quashi is clearly more 'primitive' than Rachel both are Africans and thus to the eighteenth-century mind closer to the supposed state of nature than modern Europeans. Both, though, are portrayed as sentimental heroes. The implication, in Ramsay's *Essay* at least, seems to be that the state of nature is therefore a state of sentimental heroism. For Ramsay and other anti-slavery writers seeking to mobilise readers of sentimental literature this simple, if dubious, syllogism was to form the basis of dozens of poems, novels and tracts, not least because it had the advantage that any two of these arguments could be used to prove the third. Whichever way you wanted to play it, a sentimentalised African and a belief in an altruistic state of nature could be profitably employed to undermine the arguments of pro-slavery apologists, many of whom accepted the alternative and darker view of human nature most famously expressed in the writings of Thomas Hobbes. He argued that 'it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man'.²³ These conditions, the pro-slavers argued, were the normal state of affairs in Africa. To enslave Africans was therefore an act of kindness as it took

²³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 88. The opposite view is always associated with the work of John Locke, in particular his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690).

them away from nature and inevitable warfare. Rachel and Quashi were used by Ramsay to undermine this theory. They were both altruistic and sentimental, regardless of their level of 'civilisation'. Moreover, they were in sharp contrast with the 'civilised' but clearly unsympathetic and non-altruistic slave owners. It was up to the reader possessed of true sensibility to decide which camp he or she would prefer to be identified with.

It was noted earlier that Ramsay's *Essay* is not entirely written as sentimental rhetoric but that instead Ramsay tries out a number of different styles, each adapted to the subject in hand. It is significant, therefore, that the only section which attempts to portray slavery on the human scale and to introduce named African characters is also the section written entirely in the sentimental style. For Ramsay, as for many others, sentiment and humanity were two sides of the same coin. It is one thing to write about suffering and injustice in general terms and Ramsay could be passionate enough when doing just that. But while fiery language might rouse the reader's indignation, it does little to engage his or her sympathy. It is the suffering of one rather than the many which brings a tear to the eye just as it is the benevolent actions of one that speak for the rest and allow us to see that humanity, benevolence, and 'all the nobler qualities of the heart are not monopolized by the white race'. Ramsay's strategy is admittedly a fragmented one. He does not always manage to inspire both sympathy and indignation simultaneously. But he does recognise that for the typical reader of the 1780s both ingredients are needed to spur the reader to action.

The response to Ramsay's *Essay* was rapid and the book was warmly received in the periodical press. It moved the reviewers at *The Monthly Review* to denounce slavery in exceptionally strong terms:

Read this, and blush, ye Creoles, who live at ease in our land; who spend in riot and dissipation the profits of your plantations; thus earned by extreme labour, oppression, blood! Read this, ye African traders, who tear from their native country, to be thus inhumanly treated, poor, quiet, harmless beings,

who, without our love of gain, and desire of aggrandizement, would happily recline under the shade of their plantains, and enjoy the beauties of nature and of climate which kind Providence has allowed them.²⁴

The Monthly Review's only criticism of the *Essay* was that it was too cautious. Ramsay had suggested that a limited and voluntary form of the slave trade could be retained in which only Africans who wished to go to the plantations would have to. Thus, Ramsay argued:

The slave trade, in its present form the reproach of Britain, and threatening to hasten its downfall [sic], might be made to take a new shape, and become ultimately a blessing to thousands of wretches, who, left in their native country, would have dragged out a life of miserable ignorance.²⁵

This could have been a bid on Ramsay's part to appear as a moderate. He did, after all, have first hand knowledge of the extreme resistance of many planters to any form of amelioration, let alone abolition. Alternatively, it could have been an ironic suggestion poking fun at those who said that Africans were happier as slaves. If they were happier as such, no doubt a voluntary scheme would work just as well as enforced slavery. In any case, Ramsay was clearly not convinced himself that such a scheme could work. In a footnote to this passage he comments that 'this is on supposition that the slave trade could be conducted without that violence and injustice to individuals, and enormous loss of lives [...] that now accompanies it'. If it was irony *The Monthly Review* missed it; 'why our author should wish such success to the slave trade we cannot see' they said.²⁶ *The Gentleman's Magazine's* response to Ramsay's *Essay* was more ambiguous. They include the following quotation from the last page of the *Essay* before adding a comment of their own:

²⁴ *Monthly Review*, 70 (June 1784), 413.

²⁵ Ramsay, *Essay*, pp. 292-3.

²⁶ *Monthly Review*, 70, 418.

‘May GOD, in his prudence, in his goodness, esteem us a people worthy of a blessing, so valuable and extensive as the social improvement and conversion to Christianity of our slaves would indisputably be!’

In this prayer every pious, humane, and considerate reader will join with the author.²⁷

Social improvement and conversion may have been acceptable to the reviewer at *The Gentleman's Magazine*, but abolition is not mentioned, far less advocated. Indeed, *The Gentleman's Magazine* moved abruptly to a pro-slavery position in 1788, probably because its conservative chief reviewer, Richard Gough, decided to impose his views as the trickle of abolitionist literature became a flood.²⁸ *The Monthly Review* underwent a conversion somewhat sooner, although its enthusiasm for the pro-slavery line was as short lived as its initial support for Ramsay's *Essay*. *The Monthly Review*, despite priding itself on its impartiality, had allowed itself to be drawn into a debate between Ramsay and his most vociferous critic, James Tobin, whose book, *Cursory Remarks on the Revd. Mr. Ramsay's Essay*, appeared early the following year. The outbreak of a debate on slavery, in the opinion of Thomas Clarkson, was one of the most important developments in the early history of abolitionism as it was this which ‘brought Mr. Ramsay into the first controversy ever entered into on this subject, during which, as is the case in most controversies, the cause of truth was spread’.²⁹ Public disagreement, rather than merely the *in vacuo* assertion of humane principles, was what attracted a popular audience.

Pro-Slavery Reaction to Ramsay's ‘Essay’

There is a rarely articulated presumption underlying much critical writing on both sensibility and slavery, which assumes that the discourse of sensibility must naturally be allied with the discourse of anti-slavery. There is some justification for

²⁷ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 54, II (1784), 597.

²⁸ Gough had become the chief reviewer in 1786 but it seems clear that he did not write all the reviews himself. I discuss the abrupt change in review policy in Chapter 3.

²⁹ Clarkson, *History*, I, p. 103.

this view. Sentimental writers are keen to demonstrate their sympathy with and abhorrence of physical and mental suffering. The slave trade abounded with physical and mental suffering. Sentimental writers are keen to advertise their benevolence. Abolition of the slave trade was (and sometimes still is) seen as the supremely benevolent act of a benevolent nation. Sentimental writers focused much of their attention on the powerless and abused in society. Slaves were powerless and abused. These points of convergence between the two discourses were for the most part real ones but they mask a more subtle relationship between sensibility and the slavery debate. Pro-slavery writers were often scathing of what they saw as the sentimental treatment of their livelihood. Yet at other times they too could deploy sentimental rhetoric, sometimes when describing the suffering which they believed they or their families would inevitably undergo after abolition, but in particular when trying to divert attention away from slavery and the slave trade. James Ramsay was the first abolitionist writer to use sentimental rhetoric to any extent. It is to his opponents and in particular to James Tobin that we can look for evidence of a pro-slavery form of sentimental rhetoric.

Unlike Ramsay, Tobin has no entry in the DNB although his sons George, the rear-admiral and John, the dramatist, do receive attention. Accordingly, we know very little about Tobin, other than that he set out for Nevis (the island neighbouring Ramsay's St Christopher) in about 1775, returning to Britain 'after the American war' and settling at Redland near Bristol. He died at Bristol 'at an advanced age' on 6 October 1817.³⁰ However, the evidence of his writing suggests that he was a wealthy plantation owner who was well educated and well connected. The copies of his books held by the British Library are presentation copies signed by Tobin and given to the botanist Sir Joseph Banks, then President of the Royal Society.³¹

³⁰ DNB, Articles on George Tobin (1768-1838) and John Tobin (1770-1804). Also, obituary of James Tobin, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 87, II (1817), 562.

³¹ Bank's entire collection is preserved at the British Library. The specific copies of James Tobin's works are *Cursory Remarks upon the Revd. Mr. Ramsay's Essay* (London: G. & T. Wilkie, 1785), BL: B.717.(5).; *A Short Rejoinder to the Revd. Mr. Ramsay's Reply* (London: E. Easton, 1787), BL: B.491. (2).; *A Farewel Address to the Revd. Mr. James Ramsay* (London: G. & T. Wilkie, 1788), BL: B.503. (2).

Tobin was one of many apologists for slavery who replied to Ramsay's *Essay* but he was one of only a few to whom Ramsay publicly addressed a counter-reply.³²

Like Ramsay's *Essay*, the *Cursory Remarks* is not an overwhelmingly sentimental work. Most of the book takes on Ramsay's work chapter by chapter, often page by page, and counters Ramsay's arguments in much the same language that Ramsay used. So, where Ramsay uses the language of the political economist or the historian, Tobin adopts those styles. Tobin is highly critical, scornful even, of many of Ramsay's assertions. He accuses Ramsay of getting his facts wrong, of knowing little of the actual operation of a slave plantation, and of generalising from what Tobin felt were unusual instances of cruelty to suggest that the entire plantation system was inherently cruel. All these were the standard arguments of the pro-slavery lobby and in his later work, *A reply to the personal invectives and objections* (1785), Ramsay took considerable pains to point out that his facts were accurate and based on careful personal observation as well as the best statistical information he could find. However, while the *Cursory Remarks* argues against Ramsay and in favour of slavery, Tobin makes a curious side-step at the outset of his book to ingratiate himself with the reader of sensibility. Slavery, he argues, is indeed an evil but a necessary one. Despite having taken the time and effort to write a lengthy book attacking Ramsay's anti-slavery arguments, Tobin appears not to want us to think he is so hard-hearted as to actually be arguing in favour of slavery:

I shall freely venture to deliver my sentiments [...] in firm reliance, that [...] I shall not be so far misunderstood by the candid, and judicious part of mankind, as to be ranked among the advocates for slavery; as I most sincerely join Mr. Ramsay, and every other man of sensibility, in hoping, the blessings of

³² The only other pro-slavery writer to whom Ramsay addressed an entire publication was Raymund Harris who published *Scriptural Researches on the Licitness of the Slave Trade* (London: John Stockdale, 1788). Ramsay replied in his *Examination of the Rev. Mr. Harris's "Scriptural Researches"* (London: J. Phillips, 1788). Both works are close Biblical readings and neither author finds time for anything approaching sentimental rhetoric.

freedom will in due time, be equally diffused over the face of the whole globe.³³

In the opinion of Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, the African and former slave whose 1787 book *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* included a long critique of the *Cursory Remarks*, this passage showed that Tobin's 'understanding [had] got the better of his avarice' and that 'it would seem that he was a little ashamed of his craftsmen, and would not like to be ranked or appear amongst them'.³⁴ Cugoano perhaps overestimates Tobin's understanding. A key phrase in this passage is 'in due time'. Tobin plainly believes in the institution of chattel slavery, or else he would not have written his book. The 'necessary evil' argument which Tobin adopts is a standard one in the conservative arsenal. Rather than abolish a practise which benefits some while harming others, it is argued that the good done to one group outweighs the bad done to another. What is interesting, however, is the way in which in this passage Tobin characterises Ramsay as a 'man of sensibility'. Since Tobin seems to want to join Ramsay, he must therefore see himself as a man of sensibility, or at least want others to see him as such. More interesting still is his unquestioned assumption that every man of sensibility would wish for freedom to be 'diffused over the face of the whole globe.' If this is true and sensibility and anti-slavery really are as indivisible as he would appear to be arguing, then Tobin has a tricky problem: as long as he wishes to advertise himself as a man of sensibility he must argue for the continued existence of an institution which is incompatible with the persona which he hopes to project. Tobin attempts to solve this problem in two ways. Firstly, he soft-peddles on any criticism of Ramsay's sentimental passages and, secondly, he promotes a sentimentalised political agenda of his own in order to distract attention away from the injustices committed by slave owners and slave traders.

In an attempt to get, quite literally, into the good books of the sentimental reader, Tobin is anxious not to offend those whose sensibilities were moved by reading

³³ Tobin, *Cursory Remarks*, pp. 4-5.

³⁴ Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787), ed. Vincent Carretta (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 18.

Ramsay's *Essay*. Every chapter of the *Essay* is directly challenged in *Cursory Remarks* with the important omission of the chapter section 'African Capacity Vindicated from Experience', the section in which Ramsay introduces Quashi and Joseph Rachel. Tobin may have omitted criticism of this section for practical reasons. It may simply have been that he had no information with which to challenge the veracity of these stories or that he knew the stories to be essentially true. This, however, seems overly simplistic. Had Tobin wished to criticise this section he could easily have done so by making fun of the sentimental style. This was a tactic used by many pro-slavery writers who increasingly argued that their position was determined by facts while the anti-slavery position was governed by emotion. Moreover, the pro-slavers felt that they represented the legitimate interests of the business community while the anti-slavery camp was made up of women, clerics and artists. As we saw in Chapter Three, a contributor to *The Gentleman's Magazine* was scathing in his attack on the 'pious divines, tender-hearted poetesses, and short-sighted politicians' whom he claimed led the abolition movement.³⁵ This is the sort of attack on sentiment in the anti-slavery debate which was all too common in the 1780s. Tobin, however, steers clear of it. In the *Cursory Remarks* he avoids criticism of Ramsay's sentimentality and professes the very greatest respect for the Reverend Mr. Ramsay's profession. It seems as though Tobin was well aware of the power and popularity of the sentimental genre (to say nothing of the position of the clergy) and so rather than offend the reader whose sensibilities had been moved by Ramsay's tales he chooses to draw a veil over Ramsay's sentimental moments.

Tobin also realised that he could not merely be on the defensive when trying to sway his readers' sensibilities. He chose rather to directly engage his readers with a sentimental passage of his own. In a central section of the *Cursory Remarks* Tobin creates a massive diversion from the suffering of the slaves and focuses instead on the suffering of the rural poor in England. The passage is a long one, and considers in turn the horrors of a poverty-stricken childhood, adulthood, and old age. This extract, from the end, gives the flavour of it:

³⁵ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 59, I (1789), 334.

A much more affecting picture of English human misery still remains to be exhibited, and that is, when the poor, exhausted, worn-out victims of labour, are become aged, infirm, and helpless, and are forced, under the complicated pressure of cold, hunger, and decrepitude, to rely, for the mere support of feeble nature on the little pittance which can be badly spared them from the calls of the younger part of their families; or, which is more dreadful, to depend entirely for such scanty relief as will barely keep souls and body together, on the humanity of the petty tyrants of their village, whose interest it is, that the languid remnant of their, now useless, lives should find a speedy period.—That *these things are so*, is not to be denied; although such a disgusting and reproachful truth may remain forgotten, or pass unheeded, amidst the career of trifling and expensive pursuits, or licentious gratifications, too generally adopted by the lordly owners of that soil, which is rendered productive, only by the ceaseless drudgery of these devoted sons and daughters of wretchedness.³⁶

From this Tobin moves to a description of the ‘joys’ of slavery. He argues that slaves have everything they need provided for them and in return all they are asked is for a little light labour. His description of this idyllic plantation is, of course, entirely misleading. Anyone who had ever visited a plantation, even the most cold-hearted apologist for slavery, would have known that enslavement was very far from being the working holiday which Tobin portrayed. But, in his portrayal of the hardships of rural life in England, Tobin had a point. Life for an agricultural labourer in the 1780s was hard and could be desperate when harvests failed or work was not available. Applications for poor relief often were in the hands of petty village tyrants while landlords, whether actually ‘lordly’ or not, quite frequently did not live up to the ideal of the benevolent patriarch idealised and promoted in countless sentimental novels. If charity began at home there was indeed plenty for the late-eighteenth-century humanitarian to worry about on his or her own doorstep and this is what gives Tobin’s diversionary tactic its power.

³⁶ Tobin, *Cursory Remarks*, pp. 90-91.

Moreover, Tobin's diversion is a sentimental one. The 'affecting picture' which he draws is aimed at the emotional subversion of the intellect. He hopes thereby to enlist the sympathy of the reader for the victims of labour', now 'aged, infirm, and helpless'.

A number of people took exception to Tobin's sentimental diversion. Cugoano was clear that 'the poorest in England would not change their situation for that of slaves' and with good reason; 'slaves, like animals are bought and sold, and dealt with as their capricious owners may think fit, even in torturing and tearing them to pieces'.³⁷ Ramsay dismissed Tobin's argument as nonsense and produced a short parody of Tobin's comparisons between the British poor and the plantation slave. This section of Tobin's book, argues Ramsay,

Is taken up with an elaborate description of the worse than wretched situation of English peasants, who wear shoes fortified with iron, and are not suffered to labour on Sundays; and if he describes it fairly, it would be a good Christian act in him to propose a bill to be pushed through with all the West Indian interest in Parliament, to reduce them all to the happy state of West Indian slavery.³⁸

Ramsay's jibe exposes the fundamental lie in Tobin's argument, that however hard things may be for English labourers they are surely better than for slaves in the plantations. No-one, *implies* Ramsay, could countenance the idea that English rural labourers would or should exchange a life of drudgery for a life of servitude. Why then should we presume to make the same judgements over the lives of Africans? The ironic strategy adopted by Ramsay in this passage is not a particularly complicated one but it is effective. 'This', replies Tobin, 'is another curious specimen of Mr. R.'s wit, but it is by no means keen enough to supply the place of

³⁷ Cugoano, pp. 19-20.

³⁸ James Ramsay, *A reply to the personal invectives and objections contained in two answers, published by certain anonymous persons, to an essay on the treatment and conversion of African Slaves in the British Colonies...* (London: J. Phillips, 1785), p. 92.

argument.’ Some may have considered it equally curious that Tobin felt unable to counter with any further argument himself.³⁹

Tobin’s use of sentimental rhetoric is, therefore, twofold. He makes attempts at sentimental arguments which he couches in sentimental language in order to position himself, somewhat opportunistically, alongside the genre. Later he creates a long sentimental diversion which he hopes will remind his reader that ‘charity begins at home’. These tactics did little to convince his critics either of the strength of his arguments or of the sincerity of his feelings. Olaudah Equiano in particular launched a scathing personal attack on Tobin in a letter to *The Public Advertiser* on 28 January 1788, in which he argued that one who attempted ‘to justify the cruelties inflicted on the negroes in the West Indies’ could not ‘be susceptible of human pity’. Equiano makes it clear that Tobin’s lack of feeling, and his lack of recognition of the equality of human feeling, places Tobin in a position no higher than an animal. ‘Who could but the Author of the Cursory Remarks so debase his nature, as not to feel his keenest pangs of heart on reading [the slaves’] deplorable story?’ Later he asks Tobin ‘why treat [the Negro] as if he was not of like feeling?’ To Tobin’s rather unconvincing foray into sentimental rhetoric Equiano counters with questions that probe at the heart of theories of sympathy, natural right, and universal feeling. Equiano’s attack does not quite constitute sentimental rhetoric itself, for all its talk of hearts, pity, and feeling, yet it is fully experienced in the rhetoric and theory of sensibility. It does, at the very least, demonstrate a thorough understanding of those sentimental arguments which Tobin, as an opportunist, grasps only imperfectly.⁴⁰

Tobin chose agricultural labourers as his sentimental diversion from slavery but the truth was that there were plenty of candidates in late-eighteenth-century Britain including the poor, the disabled, war veterans, ‘fallen’ women, children, and animals. From a long list two groups in particular were singled out for comparison

³⁹ James Tobin, *A short rejoinder to the Revd. Mr. Ramsay’s reply: with a word or two on some other publications of the same tendency* (London: E. Easton, 1787), p. 66.

⁴⁰ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 328.

with slaves: miners, particularly coal miners, and chimney sweeps. There are a number of reasons for this. All industries involved child labour, in harsh conditions and with extremely high rates of mortality. But slaves, sweeps, and miners have something else in common: all have black faces. This point of comparison, at least as far as sweeps were concerned, seemed obvious to the author of a 1788 poem in the *Gentleman's Magazine* who talked of 'Sweeps! Negroes in this land of Freedom'.⁴¹ Child chimney sweeps were increasingly being considered a national disgrace in the 1780s. Small children would climb up chimneys to clean them where they would sometimes suffocate or fall into still-lit fires. Many who survived were permanently disabled while few reached adulthood whole and healthy. The majority of people who wrote to highlight the appalling conditions endured by child chimney sweeps were opponents of slavery as well. The first person to seriously raise the issue of child sweeps was Jonas Hanway, who campaigned on several humanitarian issues and who produced a number of works on sweeps including, in 1785, *A Sentimental History of Chimney Sweepers*. Hanway died in 1786, just as the slavery debate was growing in public importance, but he was aware of slavery and opposed to it. Moreover, he took a broad view which clearly rejected the 'charity begins at home' argument: 'if *charity* extends to the relief of every kind of suffering of body and mind,' he argued, 'it takes in the chimney-sweeping sooty boy and the miserable negroe-slave, the ignorant poor child,—and the sinner of every class!'⁴²

More ambivalent is the reviewer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* who seems to oppose slavery, but is rather more keen to mobilise support for the anti-child

⁴¹ Oxoniensis, 'A Poor Sweep', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 58, I (1788), 155.

⁴² Jonas Hanway, *A Sentimental History of the Chimney Sweepers, in London and Westminster* (London: Dodsley and Sewell, 1785), pp. xxvi-ii. Hanway's other works on the subject were *The State of Chimney-Sweepers young apprentices, shewing the wretched condition of the distressed boys* (London: n.p. 1773) and *The State of Master Chimney-Sweepers, and their Journeymen, particularly of the Distressed Boys, Apprentices, who are daily seen in the streets of these cities staggering under a load of misery. With a proposal for their relief* (London: Sewel, 1779). For a biography of Hanway see John Pugh, *Remarkable Occurrences in the Life of Jonas Hanway, Esq.* (London: J. Davis, Payne & Son, Cadell, Sewel and Flexney, 1787). The best known references to both sweeps and Africans in the period (though not in this case slaves) is in the poems 'The Little Black Boy' and 'The Chimney Sweeper' in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789). Both poems make the point that suffering will be relieved in heaven where blackness will be replaced by holy light.

sweep cause. In a review of a book by Hanway's friend James Pettit Andrews, which appeared in 1788 and which is little more than a condensation of Hanway's *Sentimental History*, the reviewer brings together the slavery issue with the theme of child sweeps:

Surely, if the management of our plantations and our chimnies would allow us, it were to be wished that we should have nothing to do with blacks in either case. We are now thinking of the poor Africans; let us also think of those English men, those English *Children*, who only resemble the Africans in colour.⁴³

The reviewer sees a wide gulf between the natural state of the chimney sweeps and that of Africans. These two groups, he suggests, have nothing in common but their colour. If the institution of child sweeps were to be abolished these poor black children could, quite literally, scrub their skins white and take their place in society as Englishmen. Africans, he makes plain, are quite different; they are unable to change at all. While this passage is very far from being a call to retain the institution of slavery it is plain that the reviewer views Africans as innately inferior to Europeans. He was not alone. While some sought to promote interest in outlawing child sweeps at the expense of the campaign to abolish the slave trade, others saw the origins of juvenile sweeping in a debased nature common to Africans and the poorest in society. 'From its nature', argued David Porter in 1792, climbing chimnies 'was probably the desperate expedient of a criminal, or the last resource of some poor Negro to prolong a miserable life'.⁴⁴ One reviewer was certain of the importance of the issue: 'it is, in some respects, worse than the African slave trade', they announced, 'stop, for goodness sake! stop the practise!'⁴⁵ Another was more keen to expose the misery close to home. The

⁴³ 'Review of *An Appeal to the Humane, on behalf of the most Deplorable Class of Society, the Climbing Boys employed by the Chimney Sweepers*. By J.P. Andrews.', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 58, I (1788), 151. The book reviewed was; James Pettitt Andrews, *An Appeal to the Humane...* (London: John Stockdale, 1788).

⁴⁴ David Porter, *Considerations on the Present State of Chimney Sweepers, with some observations on the Act of Parliament intended for their regulation and Relief; with Proposals for their Further Relief* (London: T. Burton, 1792), pp. 12-13.

⁴⁵ 'Review of Andrews, *An Appeal to the Humane*', *Monthly Review*, 78 (1788) 260-61.

child chimney sweepers, she argued. 'undergo harder labour, and, at the same time, more painful than slaves who work in mines'. These white children differ from the actual slaves in one important respect: 'under all that sable hue they would, if washed, and cleaned, and fed, be as attractive as the babes of wealth and family'.⁴⁶

The campaign to provide 'relief' for the climbing boys was, of course, a laudable one and was ultimately to lead to considerable child labour legislation in the nineteenth century and beyond. It was also a campaign which was largely supported by the abolitionists. However, it is significant that of all the reviewing publications of the period, *The Gentleman's Magazine* appeared both the most keen to promote the campaign against child chimney sweeps and the least inclined to support abolition of the slave trade. Those who were keen to maintain slavery could use the example of sweeps to argue that philanthropists should confine their attentions to their own doorsteps. In the case of *The Gentleman's Magazine* it would appear that a sentimental diversion, the 'charity begins at home' argument, with child chimney sweeps being closest to home, had been amongst the factors to influence and finally change the mind of the reviewer.

Some writers, like 'Rachel' in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, used the conditions experienced by miners to divert attention from the slavery argument. Certainly mining was a far more arduous and hazardous occupation in the eighteenth century than it is now (and even now it is a dangerous and difficult job). Indeed, when Jonas Hanway wanted to find an occupation that was worse than sweeping chimneys his example was the 'quick-silver mines of the *Austrian dominions*'.⁴⁷ In Britain in the 1780s coal miners were as likely to be children as adults and as likely to be women as men. They worked with picks and shovels, climbing ladders to the pit face and raising the coal to the surface in buckets. While underground there was the ever present danger of firedamp—a mixture of explosive gases—which could be ignited at any time by the candles the miners used to find their way. (It was not until 1815 that Humphrey Davy invented his famous safety lamp.) Cornish

⁴⁶ 'Rachel Weeping for her Children', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 56 (1786), 724-725.

⁴⁷ Hanway, *Sentimental History*, p. 43.

tin and arsenic miners and Scottish and Derbyshire lead miners worked in conditions which were literally poisonous. Clearly miners were as deserving of sympathy as anyone else. This angle was adopted by the pro-slavery apologist Gordon Turnbull in his 1786 book *An Apology for Negro Slavery*. Turnbull was a Grenada planter who had already written a guide to good plantation management.⁴⁸ The *Apology* employs many of the then standard economic and theological arguments in favour of slavery as well as launching a sustained personal attack on James Ramsay, an attack which prompted Equiano to leap to Ramsay's defence in a letter to *The Public Advertiser* on 5 February 1788. Equiano tells us that 'I have known [Ramsay] well both here and in the West Indies for many years'. Accordingly, in Equiano's view, Turnbull's attack on Ramsay was an 'attempt to wound the reputation of the reverend Essayist by false calumnies, gross contradictions of several well known facts, and insidious suppression of others'.⁴⁹ In this, Equiano's analysis of Turnbull's work remains accurate. What interested Equiano less, however, was Turnbull's use of sentimental rhetoric, important here, since the *Apology* concludes on a solidly sentimental note. Turnbull initially follows the same diversionary route taken by Tobin and compares the drudgery of English peasants with the 'idyllic' conditions experienced by plantation slaves. He then quotes generously from a georgic poem by James Grainger, *The Sugar Cane* (1764), which as well as offering much in the way of instruction to slave owners also makes the connection between miners and slaves. The italics in the final line are Turnbull's although the point need hardly have been emphasised any further.

Nor, Negroe, at thy destiny repine,
 Tho' doom'd to toil from dawn to setting sun.
 How far more pleasant is thy rural task,
 Than theirs who sweat, sequester'd from the day,
 In dark tartarean caves, sunk far beneath
 The earth's dark surface; where sulphureous flames,
 Oft from their vap'ry prisons bursting wild,

⁴⁸ Gordon Turnbull, *Letters to a young planter; or, observations on the management of a sugar-plantation* (London: Stuart and Stevenson, 1785).

⁴⁹ Equiano, pp. 330-332.

To dire explosion give the cavern deep,
 And in dread ruin all its inmates whelm?—
 Nor fateful only in the bursting flame;
 The exhalations of the deep-dug mine,
 Tho' slow, shake from their wings as sure a death.
 With what intense severity of pain
 Hath the afflicted muse, in Scotia, seen
 The miners rack'd, who toil for fatal lead?
 What cramps, what palsies shake their feeble limbs,
 Who, on the margin of the rocky Drave
 Trace silver's fluent ore? *Yet white men these!* ⁵⁰

The infernal imagery may be deliberately reminiscent of *Paradise Lost*, but it is the miners who appear to be 'doom'd' here, not the slaves. ⁵¹ In the pro-slavery context in which this poem is quoted Grainger appears to be ironic when he says that the slaves are 'doom'd to toil from dawn to setting sun'. The extract is so clearly a diversionary tactic to show that many people, especially miners, are in a far worse position than slaves that we take the author's view to be that the slaves are not doomed at all, but instead somewhat privileged. Many of Turnbull's readers would have been familiar with this poem and would have been aware that the previous passage, which Turnbull does not quote, provides advice to slave-owners on 'inuring' slaves to labour, a process known as 'seasoning'. This advice is offered in lines which are distinctly pastoral in tone, setting up the contrast between slaves and miners which is to come in the quoted lines. Turnbull wants us to be in no doubt about the message of Grainger's poem. Grainger, Turnbull wants us to believe, is making a clear argument in favour of slavery as the lesser of many evils. However, *The Sugar Cane* is an altogether more complex poem than Turnbull would have us think, while the range of subjects covered is extraordinary. As a doctor practising on St Kitts Grainger had more than a passing acquaintance

⁵⁰ James Grainger, *The Sugar Cane* (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1764), IV, 159-76, here as quoted in Gordon Turnbull, *An Apology for Negro Slavery* (London: Stuart and Stevenson, 1786), pp. 61-2.

⁵¹ Particularly *Paradise Lost*, I, 670-717.

with the unsavoury aspects of plantation life. His poem discusses at great length the dubious delights of manuring and rat-catching. There are extensive passages on the many diseases to which the slaves were prone: he lists the yellow fly, the greasy fly, the cow-itch, chigres (a species of flea), yaws, and, 'yet of all the ills which torture Libya's sons, / Worms tyrannize the worst'.⁵² A substantial section of the poem is dedicated to the diagnosis and treatment of worm infestation. Clearly a doctor who dedicated so much energy to curing slaves was unlikely also to be a sadistic overseer. Indeed, shortly after the passage quoted by Turnbull, Grainger makes it clear that he is not an unthinking advocate for slavery:

Oh, did the tender muse possess the power,
Which Monarchs have, and monarchs oft abuse
'Twould be the fond ambition of her soul,
To quell tyrannic sway; knock off the chains
Of heart-debasing slavery, give to man,
Of every colour and of every clime,
Freedom, which stamps him image of his God.⁵³

Later he makes a plea for the common humanity of Africans and Europeans by invoking a common sentimental argument, the belief in the equality of feeling; 'the Ethiop feels', he argues, 'when treated like a man.' These lines are strongly opposed to the pro-slavery slant which Turnbull discovers, and to an extent manufactures, in Grainger's poem by italicising the final line of the quotation which he has taken out of context. Grainger's poem may not be an abolitionist work, but it does argue for amelioration. Moreover, it is a georgic poem, a form which traditionally both extolled rural life and provided instruction about good husbandry. Amongst its many characteristics is an eclecticism of content and argument which allows for opposing points of view to be expressed in the name of providing a balanced education. Turnbull's quotation from the poem militates against this tradition and imposes a fixed meaning on what is actually a complex

⁵² *The Sugar Cane*, I, 290-1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, IV, 232-8.

and subtle argument. Then, before we have had time to consider our response to the quotation, Turnbull attempts to emotionally subvert the intellect by launching into a high-flown piece of sentimental rhetoric which is extraordinary as it is only there in an attempt to persuade the reader against alleviating suffering. Turnbull concludes his *Apology* by arguing that:

Humanity has no need to visit distant regions, or to explore other climates, to search for objects of distress in another race of men! Here, at her very door, there are enough—here let sensibility drop her tear of generous pity—here let charity stretch forth her liberal hand—and here let benevolence, whom heaven has blessed with the means, exert her noblest power, indulge her sweetest gratification, and enjoy her highest and most delicious luxury!

Ye, whom warm philanthropy hath inspired with the wish, to diffuse the blessings of liberty to all your fellow-creatures!—begin at home [...] and your souls shall be filled with that delight, which is virtue's own reward in this world, and the anticipation of supreme bliss in the world to come.⁵⁴

This is the clearest usage of sentimental diversion—the ‘charity begins at home’ argument—to be found in the pro-slavery literature of the 1780s. And it is also the most overtly sentimental passage to be found there as well. All the keywords and key phrases are there: ‘objects of distress’, ‘tear of generous pity’, ‘warm philanthropy’. Sentimental arguments stress the need to alleviate suffering, to show concern for the condition of others, to act always as the Good Samaritan would. This is the natural ground of the anti-slavery campaigner. However, by the time Turnbull’s intervention was written, sentimental rhetoric was no longer the preserve of tender-hearted poetesses. It had become a mainstream discourse to which everyone must apply to catch the public imagination. Pro-slavery writers had very little in common with the sentimental reader, but they realised that in order to win the minds—and hearts—of their audience they must invoke suffering. A key strategy was to create a hierarchy of suffering and to try to persuade their readers that slavery was low down on that list, far behind coal miners and

⁵⁴ Turnbull, pp. 63-4.

underemployed agricultural labourers. By the 1780s it was no longer sufficient for a pro-slavery writer to appeal merely to logic, economics, or scriptural authority. The conservative of the 1780s had to be a man of feeling as well as a man of common sense.

Thomas Clarkson's Sentimental Rhetoric

In 1784, when James Ramsay published his *Essay*, there was still no such thing as an organised movement against the slave trade. This was to change in April 1787 with the establishment of the *Society* for Effecting the Abolition of the African Slave Trade. Among the 'Saints' of this movement was Thomas Clarkson who published in 1786 what was possibly the most influential book on slavery to appear during the eighteenth century. *His essay on the slavery and commerce of the human species* not only replaced Ramsay's *Essay* as the handbook of the movement but far surpassed it in the directness of its style. The arguments themselves differed little from those which Ramsay and others before him had made, a fact which Clarkson was at pains to make clear in his introduction. Here he praised Ramsay's *Essay* and noted that the extensive criticism which had been levelled at it by pro-slavery propagandists, especially Tobin, had only served to recommend it the more highly. Ramsay's *Essay*, he argued, was 'a work which is now firmly established; and I may add, in a very extraordinary manner, in consequence of the controversy which this gentleman has sustained with the *Cursory Remarker*'.⁵⁵

Over the years to come Clarkson's *Essay* was extensively printed and re-printed, widely quoted and reviewed, and subjected to a barrage of praise and criticism from all parties. It remains one of the most widely discussed of eighteenth-century anti-slavery publications although, as is frequently the case within the anti-slavery debate, it has interested historians of the movement rather more than literary

⁵⁵ Thomas Clarkson, *An essay on the slavery and commerce of the human species, particularly the African, translated from a Latin Dissertation, which was honoured with the first prize in the University of Cambridge, for the year 1785* (London: T. Cadell and J. Phillips, 1786), p. xxv.

critics. This is surprising since, as a piece of rhetoric, Clarkson's *Essay* has an interesting history. It was originally written, in Latin, as an entry in a Cambridge University prize competition (which it won). It was then translated, rather hurriedly Clarkson apologetically informs us, into English so that it could gain a wider audience. Clarkson's apology is not insignificant. He wants us to be aware that this is a translation of a piece written by a young man as an undergraduate exercise in the grand style of classical rhetoric, and by making his apology he hopes we will forgive any youthful grandiloquence of style. This apology is itself a rhetorical trope, one of the many ploys by which the classical rhetorician could 'put the hearer into the right frame of mind, to make him, according to the often repeated formula, "well-disposed, attentive, and receptive"'.⁵⁶ Most of Clarkson's *Essay* is translated into clear idiomatic English which, though persuasive, is rarely grandiloquent or even merely grand. It is striking that when Clarkson does choose to raise the stakes a little and appeal to the emotions, he does so not by using the formal language of the grand style of classical rhetoric, but by using the familiar language of the sentimental novelist and the familiar arguments of the sentimental philosopher. For example, near the start of the book he alludes to a number of recognisable sentimental arguments:

Alas! when we reflect that the people, thus reduced to a state of servitude, have had the same feelings with ourselves; when we reflect that they have had the same propensities to pleasure, and the same aversions from pain; another argument seems immediately to arise in opposition to the former, [that slavery is justified by long custom] deduced from our own feelings and that sympathy, which nature has implanted in our breasts, for the most useful and generous of purposes.⁵⁷

Clarkson is here articulating two fundamental sentimental arguments. The first is the argument that equality of feeling proves the equal status of all human beings. The second is the principle, put forward by Adam Smith among others, that

⁵⁶ Peter Dixon, *Rhetoric* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 28.

⁵⁷ Clarkson, *Essay*, p. 2.

sympathy is a key motivating factor in human decision-making. Indeed, there is a reference to one of Smith's best known metaphors for the human sympathetic conscience: 'the man within the breast, the supposed impartial spectator, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct'.⁵⁸ Clarkson accepts that this sympathy is a natural and universal condition and is convinced that by merely examining our own feelings we can construct an *a priori* argument against the continuation of slavery. This is the sort of reasoning on which much sentimental literature is based. Deliberately or not Clarkson commences his work with a direct appeal to the mainstream of sentimental thought and throughout he returns to this idea whenever he wants us to react emotionally to the condition of slaves, to imagine ourselves in their position and, to find and demonstrate our sympathy with their predicament.

This strategy is articulated in a long central section of the *Essay*. Here we are asked to imagine ourselves as a traveller in an African village. Before us marches a long stream of manacled slaves and at our side is a 'melancholy African' who explains who the people who walk past us are, where they come from, what their families are like, and what misfortunes befell them that they should find themselves in servitude. There are plenty of moving stories to relate before the African turns on his audience, goading them with the accusation that their professed Christianity is mere sham:

What is *Christianity*, but a system of *murder* and *oppression*? The cries and yells of the unfortunate people, who are now soon to embark for the regions of servitude, have already pierced my heart. Have you not heard me sigh, while we have been talking? Do you not see the tears that now trickle down my cheeks? and yet these hardened *Christians* are unable to be moved at all.

The traveller replies by arguing that the African is 'totally mistaken: *Christianity* is the most perfect and lovely of moral systems'. Moreover, says the traveller, Christians 'are, in short, of all nations, the most remarkable for humanity and

⁵⁸ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), ed. D D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 226-7.

justice.’ This fails to convince: “‘But why then,” replies the honest African, “do they suffer this? [...] Why are these dismal cries in vain?’”. The traveller has the last speech, if not the final utterance:

‘Can the cries and groans, with which the air now trembles, be heard across this extensive continent? Can the southern winds convey them to the ear of Britain? If they could reach the generous Englishman at home, they would pierce his heart, as they have already pierced your own. He would sympathise with you in your distress. He would be enraged at the conduct of his countrymen, and resist their tyranny.’—

But here a shriek unusually loud, accompanied with a dreadful rattling of chains, interrupted the discourse.⁵⁹

The final part of this argument is the familiar one that slavery continues to exist only because the British public are unaware of the suffering that it caused. As we have seen, this belief motivated Clarkson and finally became historical orthodoxy after the publication in 1807 of his history of the abolition movement. This view was challenged in the twentieth century, but here the process of public enlightenment is very clearly presented as the key to success. In this extract the traveller makes a direct appeal to the reader to advertise the suffering that the ‘melancholy African’ has shown him in the preceding chapter, a chapter which is, in many respects, a collection of sentimental parables and a parade of sentimental heroes all suffering as they are marched into slavery. Significantly, the language used throughout the conversation is the language of the heart, the language of tears and sighs. The melancholy African narrator tells the traveller that his heart has been ‘pierced’ and to demonstrate this inward condition he points to the external signs of his sighs and the ‘tears that now trickle down my cheeks’. The African narrator, though, is a nearly passive sufferer. His ‘act’ is one of communication which, though vital in Clarkson’s scheme of things, is not in itself enough to overthrow slavery and the slave trade. Action must follow words and it is the traveller who shows exactly how words will lead to action. He adopts the

⁵⁹ Clarkson, *Essay*, pp. 125-7.

sentimental language of the African narrator and in a short speech explains how the 'cries and groans' which he hears all around him will lead directly to political action. First they must 'reach the generous Englishman at home'. As this is not literally possible these groans will have to be represented by the next best thing: the language of feeling. Once these feelings reach England they will undoubtedly pierce the heart of the 'generous Englishman at home'. This aesthetic 'delight in misery', as Burke put it, will rapidly give way to the sympathy which Adam Smith saw as a basic ordering principle of human nature.⁶⁰ From feeling sympathy the Englishman will progress towards feeling anger and 'enraged at the conduct of his countrymen' will take the final step into political action. So powerful is this political response likely to be that Clarkson describes it as a resistance against tyranny; indeed, once these words have reached England there is no knowing how far they might provoke Englishmen into action. The traveller's peroration is left unfinished, interrupted by 'a shriek unusually loud'. It is a shriek which reminds us of the reality of the suffering around him but it also hints at the disorder lurking just beneath the surface of eighteenth-century English society. Clarkson seems to be hinting that once the tyranny of slavery is generally known the English public will stop at nothing to see justice done. It is a dangerous hint but potentially a very powerful one.

This speech, especially when viewed as the *dénouement* of the long dramatic conversation between the African and the traveller, is both sentimental rhetoric itself and a model of how sentimental rhetoric should act on the reader. It employs that most basic sentimental persuasive technique, the emotional subversion of the intellect, before throwing out some very direct hints as to how we should react to our new-found knowledge that Africans are suffering because of the slave trade. We are to react with sympathy, rage, and resistance, it argues. But it also suggests that this progression is the method by which a political writer should go about inspiring his readers to action. Earlier we saw how Ramsay urged all of these responses, albeit in different places in his text. Clarkson manages to draw them all

⁶⁰ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 41.

together and the mixture is a powerful one. The essential ingredient, however, which starts us on this progression towards political action, is sympathy. Like all sentimental writers, Clarkson maintains that it is our ability to suffer in our imagination alongside those who are really suffering which holds the key to our future actions. To alleviate our own imagined, sympathetic, suffering, and to be a benevolent or even merely a sympathetic reader of this text, it is necessary to take action to hasten the abolition of the slave trade.

Three Anglo-African Writers

Very few of the non-fictional contributions to the eighteenth-century slavery debate have been reprinted in the twentieth century.⁶¹ Amongst those which have are three texts which were considered extraordinary by many contemporaries because they were written by Africans and former slaves. These texts: *The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho* (1782), Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments* (1787), and Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789), have received considerable scholarly attention in recent years. As Africans and former slaves the authors are all able to draw on personal experience when making a case against slavery. As writers of literature in English they are also able to draw upon familiar literary methods and conventions to position their texts to best effect in the late-eighteenth-century literary and political marketplace. Each of the three makes some use of sentimental rhetoric. [Figures 6 and 7]

Sancho, writing before the development of an organised abolition movement, rarely opposes slavery directly. His *Letters* have a strong relationship with the works of Laurence Sterne and Sancho's voice is often both powerfully sentimental and powerfully persuasive. Cugoano's writing is impassioned, persuasive, and clearly intended to rouse the emotions in the hope of inspiring the reader to take action against slavery. It is only rarely sentimental, but these few moments of

⁶¹ A generous selection of eighteenth-century tracts have recently become available in the multi-volume *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the British Romantic Period*, 8 vols, ed. Peter Kitson *et al* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1999).



Figure 6

Ignatius Sancho

Bertolozzi's engraving of
Gainsborough's painting, from the
frontispiece of *The Letters of the
Late Ignatius Sancho* (1782)

Figure 7

Olaudah Equiano

From the Frontispiece of *The Interesting
Narrative* (1789)



sentiment come at key moments in the text. Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* is often praised for its clarity of style and the directness of its rhetoric. Although often a moving work it is rarely a sentimental one, yet even Equiano uses sentimental rhetoric in places. The works of these three authors, then, provide a useful site for a brief examination of the use of late-eighteenth-century sentimental rhetoric in political texts which, unusually, have remained popular into the late twentieth century.

In Chapter Three we examined Ignatius Sancho's correspondence with Laurence Sterne and noted that Sancho used sentimental arguments in sentimental language to persuade Sterne to 'give one half hour's attention to slavery'. The rhetorical strategies adopted in the Sancho-Sterne correspondence have occasioned more criticism than any other of Sancho's letters and critics have been divided as to whether Sancho's letter was simply imitative of Sterne's style or whether it was involved in a more complex relationship with Sterne. Earlier critics such as Paul Edwards, James Walvin, and Keith Sandiford saw Sancho's letter as derivative, the latter noting Sancho's 'flair for imitation',⁶² but an emerging consensus now suggests that Sancho's intervention was both an original and a radical gesture which strongly influenced Sterne and positioned Sancho as an outspoken opponent of slavery.⁶³ The debate is an interesting one but it is important to note that all critics are agreed on the sentimental tone of this letter (and of most of the others to be found in the collection). As so much attention has been directed towards this particular letter, it may be useful here to examine some of the others to discover how he uses the rhetoric of sensibility.

⁶² Keith A. Sandiford, *Measuring the Moment: Strategies of Protest in Eighteenth-Century Afro-English Writing* (London: Associated University Presses, 1988), p. 79. For other examples of the earlier view see James Walvin, *Black and White: the Negro and English Society, 1555-1945* (London: Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1973) and Paul Edwards's introductions to *The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho: An African, to which are Prefixed, Memoirs of His Life by Joseph Jekyll, Esq., M.P.* (London: Dawson's of Pall Mall, 1968) and *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994).

⁶³ See Sukhdev Sandhu, 'Ignatius Sancho and Laurence Sterne', *Research in African Literature* 29, 4 (Winter 1998), 88-105 and Markman Ellis 'Ignatius Sancho's Letters: Sentimental Libertinism and the Politics of Form', *"Genius in Bondage": Literature of the Early Black Atlantic* eds. Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould (Forthcoming: University Press of Kentucky, 2000).

The first thing we note about Sancho's style is that it is not consistent. Sancho adopts a number of different voices to fit the topic he is writing on, although amongst these voices the sentimental is predominant. However, although sentimental Sancho is rarely lachrymose. The marathon weeping sessions which characterise the novels of Mackenzie and others are seldom to be found in Sancho's *Letters*. Instead the predominant tone is one of playfulness expressed through light satire, gentle humour, and a pervading delight in verbal and typographical witticisms. The tone, as many have pointed out, is distinctly Shandean but where Sterne frequently sheds a tear over the ill, the mad, the poor, and the dying Sancho is more likely to find a joke at the expense of human vanity. What makes Sancho sentimental is not excessive dolefulness or delight in misery but rather his ability to universalise from the seemingly trivial, his constant ability to draw a surprising and often challenging message from the most domestic of incidents. Sancho's arguments are occasionally sentimental ones, and he sometimes makes a determined effort to emotionally subvert the intellect of his readers before presenting them with his considered views, but for the most part the *Letters* are a collection of sentimental parables which taken together posit Sancho as an exemplar of the sentimental hero. One possible way of reading the *Letters* might be to view them as akin to an epistolary novel of sensibility edited from a collection of discovered manuscripts.

Many of Sancho's letters include sentimental parables, often in letters of thanks in which the happiness of the Sancho family is shown as arising from a gift from the correspondent. These letters are rarely intentionally persuasive and so cannot be described as being more than loosely rhetorical. On the other hand, a number of letters are clearly intended to persuade, including letters to Julius Soubise urging him to reform his moral outlook, a letter to a Mr Charles Browne asking him to employ a servant of Sancho's acquaintance, and a number of letters to newspapers on public themes. The tone of most of the latter is lightly satirical and seemingly not at all sentimental, but like a sentimental rhetorician Sancho frequently manages to draw a large message from a small example. In a letter to *The General Advertiser* written in April 1778, for example, he contributes to the debate taking

place in London over the entry of France into the war with the American colonies. He notes the 'scarcity of men' for military service and argues that there exists:

A resource which would greatly benefit the people at large (by being more usefully employed), and which are happily half-trained already for the service of their country—by being—*powder proof*—light, active young fellows:—I dare say you have anticipated my scheme, which is to form ten companies at least, out of the very numerous body of hair-dressers.⁶⁴

Gunpowder and hair-powder, we know, are hardly comparable and this incongruity adds to the humour of the piece, humour which Sancho drives home with his suggestion that his plan would save the nation time as 'people of the *ton* of both sexes' often lose 'between two or three hours daily on this important business'. Moreover, Sancho claims that his plan would 'cleanse, settle, and emancipate from the cruel bondage of French, as well as native friseurs, the heads of my fellow subjects.' Sancho scores points against several perennial targets including a vain and effeminate fashionable world (and, of course, the French). Both the humour and the political significance of the letter are derived from the simple ironic fact that while Britain is facing one of its gravest crises for many years the rulers of the kingdom are holding back from military service a large number of badly needed young men for no other reason than their own vanity. While this subject could have been approached in a number of different ways, in Sancho's hands it becomes a good example of sentimental humour being used for rhetorical ends. The letter agrees with many of the conventions of sentimental comedy. It focuses on the domestic arrangements of 'people of the *ton*' and contrasts these arrangements with the needs of the state. It starts in the domestic sphere and moves into the public sphere. Finally, it allows the reader to extrapolate beyond the details given to form their own conclusions about the importance (or otherwise) of many of the domestic arrangements of the upper classes. If hairdressers go first then who goes next? This may not be 'weeping sensibility', but it certainly is a variety of the

⁶⁴ *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho*, p. 214.

sentimental parable used in a light and satirical manner to make a serious point about British society at a time of war.

Few of Sancho's letters are public rhetoric of this sort and yet *The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho* taken as a whole is a strong intervention in the emerging discourse of anti-slavery and a very clear example of public sentimental rhetoric. The rhetorical purpose of the collection is made explicit in an editorial note at the start of the book. The editor, Frances Crew, writes that one of her main motives for publishing the letters is 'the desire of shewing that an untutored African may possess abilities equal to an European'.⁶⁵ There were few precedents for such a venture. The narratives of the lives of Briton Hammon and Ukawsaw Gronniosaw had been taken down by amanuenses and published in 1760 and 1772 respectively but there is no evidence that either Sancho or Crew had read these.⁶⁶ The poems of Phillis Wheatley, a young Boston slave, famously demonstrated the abilities of 'an untutored African' when they appeared in 1773.⁶⁷ Sancho recognised them as the work of 'genius in bondage' but Wheatley's poems were not on the scale of Sancho's *Letters* nor did they display the range of personal experience and literary virtuosity to be found in Sancho's work.⁶⁸ The model for the *Letters* had to be found elsewhere and while collections of correspondence remained a perennial favourite in late-eighteenth-century Britain, this was not the only model possible. Indeed, Sancho himself had signalled his debt to Sterne and Scott and while he might have been surprised to have found his letters recast in the mould of the sentimental novel, in particular the epistolary novel, there are strong indications that this was the model favoured by Frances Crew.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁶ *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (Boston: Green & Russell, 1760) and *A Narrative of the Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, related by himself*. The first edition given in the ESTC is Newport, Rhode Island: S. Southwick, 1774. However, this was apparently printed in Bath. A second edition is listed as being published in Bath by W. Gye and T. Mills in 1775. Numerous other editions appeared later in the eighteenth century, all provincial, and it was even translated into Welsh by W. Williams in 1779.

⁶⁷ Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. By Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston, in New England (London: A. Bell, 1773).

⁶⁸ *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho*, p. 112.

Several factors tend to support this view, not least Crew's editorial note which resembles both those commonly prefixed to novels comprised of supposedly discovered manuscripts and those attached to epistolary novels. Crew assures the reader that Sancho's letters were private ones and that he kept no duplicates. The letters, she tells us, have all 'been collected from the various friends to whom they were addressed'. Crew's work as editor was therefore a proactive one, a task which involved seeking out Sancho's friends and persuading them to make the letters public. We do not know what criteria she used for inclusion, but it is clear that physical considerations must have come into play. We have only one letter from Sancho to Soubise in India, for example, presumably from a duplicate. How many more might have been found in India is an open question. Crew's intervention resembles fictional attempts to recover manuscripts. Henry Mackenzie, at the start of *The Man of Feeling*, exchanges a volume of 'the German Illustrissimi' which he chanced to have in his pocket for the manuscript of Harley's life, while Charles Johnstone, in the preface to *Chrysal, or, The Adventures of a Guinea*, rushes back to a chandlers shop in Whitechapel to recover pages of a manuscript used to wrap butter.⁶⁹ Crew's efforts quite possibly required similar interventions, not inconceivable when we consider that in real life the entire manuscripts of *The Journal of the House of Lords* went missing in 1836 and were not recovered until 1849 when they too were found being used to wrap butter by a grocer in the Walworth Road.

Having collected the letters, Crew needed to edit and arrange them and while the chronological arrangement she adopted might seem to be the natural one it was not necessarily so. Other arrangements could have been chosen, with both precedent and justification, and there is no overriding reason why Sancho's letters should not have been arranged either by subject matter or by recipient. However, the chronological approach supplies narrative to what might otherwise be an eclectic collection. Moreover, it is clear that Crew was selective in her choice of letters, a point now established by Vincent Carretta's discovery of two previously

⁶⁹ Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling* (1771) ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 5; Charles Johnstone, *Chrysal, or, The Adventures of a Guinea*, 2 vols (London: T. Beckett, 1760), I, pp. viii-ix.

unpublished letters and by John Ralph Willis's publication of a number of letters likely to be Sancho's work.⁷⁰ Crew's editorial interventions are not unusual ones in the compilation of correspondence, but are similar to the comments supplied by the purportive editors of many epistolary novels, who drive narrative forwards through a chronological arrangement and who 'select' only or chiefly the letters of their main protagonist. Even Samuel Richardson who, in the preface to *Clarissa*, explains that he rejected the advice of the friend who 'advised him to give a narrative turn to the letters, and to publish only what concerned the principle heroine', essentially follows this advice.⁷¹ Crew also conforms to this model with the result that the *Letters* structurally resemble the epistolary novel, so many of which were written in the sentimental style.

Viewing the *Letters* in this light somewhat alters our ideas of their reception and rhetorical purpose, but it integrates them more closely within the mainstream of anti-slavery writing in the mid-eighteenth century. As we have seen, anti-slavery writing was largely confined to literary texts until the mid-1780s, while the only famous example of African writing before 1782 was the poems of Phillis Wheatley. Sancho's readers would have been familiar with Wheatley and with the discussion of slavery in literary texts by Sterne, Scott and Mackenzie. Anti-slavery tracts by Benezet, Wesley, and Sharp were available in 1782 but could^{be} and often were viewed as the extremist and obsessive writings of Quakers and Methodists. The humanity of these writers was rarely questioned, but their relevance to the social and political mainstream was less obvious to the Anglican majority. Sancho had read at least some of Sharp's books but in this he was probably exceptional, a fact which he appears to have understood well. It is significant that among his many letters the only one surviving which directly asks a public figure to campaign at some level against slavery is the letter to Sterne. Sancho clearly understood that anti-slavery in its early phase was being played out in the pages of novels and

⁷⁰ J.R. Willis, 'New Light on the Life of Ignatius Sancho: Some Unpublished Letters', *Slavery and Abolition*, 1 (1980), 345-58; Vincent Carretta, 'Three West Indian Writers of the 1780s Revisited and Revised', *Research in African Literature*, 29, 4 (Winter 1998), 73-86.

⁷¹ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady* (1747-1748), ed. Angus Ross (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 35-6.

poems rather than in the 'serious' political tracts where the arguments were chiefly to be made after 1784.

In this climate, it is hardly surprising that Crew did everything possible to enhance the literary credentials of the *Letters* and soften their political and rhetorical stance. We can only speculate as to the letters which she may have rejected for the collection, but we can see that those which remain tell the story of a middle aged man at the centre of a domestic and commercial network. From this vantage point Sancho uses his connections to communicate homely wisdom, poignant if light satire, and opinions on the advantages of benevolence, Christian piety, and commerce. In short, Ignatius Sancho becomes, through the organisation and presentation of the *Letters*, a very typical sentimental hero whose heroism is demonstrated through a series of sentimental parables which finally add up to one meta-parable 'shewing that an untutored African may possess abilities equal to an European'. The *Letters* become a sustained work of sentimental rhetoric, clearly positioned in the literary tradition of anti-slavery and available as a further and persuasive argument in that debate. As such the collection is amongst the best and the most successful examples of sentimental rhetoric produced in the late eighteenth century.

Both Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments* and Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* are strongly argued and cleverly crafted pieces of rhetoric. Their relationship with the discourse of sensibility is less obvious, however, and they make use of sentimental rhetoric only occasionally for clearly defined purposes. Cugoano's work distinguishes between 'thoughts' and 'sentiments' in its title but here the latter word seems to correspond to 'opinions' rather than to any profession of the writer's sensibility. The book is a fiercely argued one and consists, for the most part, of scriptural arguments against slavery. These make difficult reading for most twentieth-century readers but, as Vincent Carretta has pointed out, this does not necessarily mean that the work is badly constructed. *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Carretta argues, is an example of the Jeremiad or political sermon and many of its formal qualities 'that might strike readers as ungrammatical, repetitive, imitative,

and lacking in narrative force may be explained by approaching the text from the African oral and Christian homiletic traditions'. Moreover, he argues, despite early critics such as the Abbé Gregoire focusing on Cugoano's 'use of rhetorical pathos' this approach 'underestimates his reliance on logic and his use of authority'.⁷²

Cugoano does indeed make much use of pathos, but only in the classical sense which embraced all emotions. Despite Gregoire's argument that in the *Thoughts and Sentiments* 'grief is eloquent', the predominant tone is anger and Cugoano rarely makes use of what the eighteenth century reader would have understood either by pathos or sentiment.⁷³ This is surprising as, in the opening pages of the *Thoughts and Sentiments*, Cugoano is at some pains to associate himself with the benevolent strand of sentimental thinking while one of his first Biblical allusions is an explicitly tearful one: 'did not I weep for him that was in trouble; was not my soul grieved for the poor?'. The ability to weep for others, that is, to show sympathy towards the distress of others, is one of the key building blocks of a sentimental argument. Cugoano immediately follows this up with praise for the 'many benevolent and humane gentlemen' who campaign against the slave trade and then declares that slavery can only be justified by those 'who must eventually resign their own claim to any degree of sensibility and humanity'.⁷⁴

This would appear to be Cugoano's way of saying that he intends to appeal to the reader's sensibility as well as to their Christian beliefs and their powers of reasoning. However, the brief flashes of sentimental rhetoric which appear in the first few pages of his book are followed up in only one section which follows, the short passage in which he describes his abduction and his experiences in the middle passage and the plantations. That Cugoano should describe these clearly traumatic episodes in feeling language is understandable, but we should not, as some have done, underestimate his rhetorical strategy. Keith Sandiford, for example, argues

⁷² Vincent Carretta, 'Introduction' to Cugoano, p. xxii.

⁷³ Henri Baptiste Grégoire (Abbé Grégoire), *An Enquiry concerning the intellectual and moral faculties, and literature of Negroes; followed with an account of the life and works of fifteen Negroes and Mulattoes distinguished in Science, Literature and the Arts*, trans. D.B. Warden (Brooklyn: Thomas Kirk, 1810), p. 342.

⁷⁴ Cugoano, pp. 9-10. The quotation is from *Job* 30: 25.

that Cugoano ‘chose an unvarnished sentimental naïveté in relating the details of his early life and in recounting the circumstances of his enslavement.’ While Sandiford concedes that this ‘was no doubt calculated to enlist the sympathies of readers inclined to sentimentalism’ there is also no missing his sceptical attitude to the discourse favoured by Cugoano on this occasion.⁷⁵ Cugoano’s repeated description of his ‘cries and tears’ almost certainly reflect his actual childhood response to his abduction, but he immediately follows up this feeling passage with an analysis of how his childhood experience has directed his adult emotional state. ‘The grievous thoughts which I then felt’, he tells us, ‘still pant in my heart; though my fears and tears have long since subsided’.⁷⁶ This is a subtle sentimental argument which works by providing the reader with a model for his or her own response to Cugoano’s text. While the descriptions of the abuse he received as a child, written in sentimental language, might draw tears from sentimental readers, what is really important is what remains with them afterwards. This veiled attack on false sensibility emotionally subverts and provokes the reader to themselves take action to oppose slavery, even after the ‘fears and tears’ invoked by reading this passage have subsided.

In his opening pages, and particularly in the autobiographical passages, Cugoano shows himself to be adept at using sentimental rhetoric. He does not, however, sustain his use of the technique. Cugoano seems happy to draw his reader in by hinting at the fashionable idiom, but he soon makes it plain that his is an altogether different work. A few pages further on his autobiography—one of the earliest slave narratives—returns to the rhetoric of sensibility for a short period but here he seems not to be addressing his preferred reader. For most of his work Cugoano chooses to target the sort of readers who might have made up the congregation at Evangelical and Methodist meetings rather than those who might have filled the drawing rooms of the wealthy and the aspiring middle classes. The latter group are not entirely forgotten but neither are they directly addressed. Cugoano was clearly familiar with the works of Ramsay and Clarkson, and probably knew Sancho

⁷⁵ Sandiford, p. 97.

⁷⁶ Cugoano, p. 15.

personally, yet unlike them he chose not to model more than a few short passages on the writings of literary sentimentalists. In this respect his work owes more to anti-slavery writers such as Sharp and Benezet.

While Cugoano's text is the earlier, Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* is by far the better known of the two. It was a phenomenal bestseller in the eighteenth century, going through nine editions, and in the late-twentieth century is rapidly becoming one of the most frequently assigned eighteenth-century texts in universities on both sides of the Atlantic. Accordingly, a large and ever-growing body of critical literature has attached itself to the text, examining the work's role as a proto-typical slave narrative, its position in the literature of empire, and its relationship with the burgeoning eighteenth-century market for travel literature. Its role as political rhetoric has not been ignored either, but few critics have examined its relationship with the discourse of sensibility. Such a relationship exists since, like Cugoano before him, Equiano adopts a number of voices and makes use of sentimental rhetoric at intervals without committing himself to following that mode of persuasion throughout his work. Like Cugoano, Equiano reaches his most sentimental moments while describing his childhood abduction but, unlike Cugoano, Equiano's flirtation with sentimental rhetoric is very brief indeed. In chapter two of *The Interesting Narrative* Equiano describes the abduction of himself and his sister. In this situation 'the only comfort we had was in being in one another's arms all that night, and bathing each other with our tears. But, alas! we were soon deprived of even the smallest comfort of weeping together'.⁷⁷ This emphasis on the mutuality and communicative function of tears is repeated a few pages later when Equiano is temporarily re-united with his sister:

As soon as she saw me she gave a loud shriek, and ran into my arms.—I was quite overpowered; neither of us could speak, but, for a considerable time, clung to each other in mutual embraces, unable to do anything but weep. Our meeting affected all who saw us.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Equiano, pp. 47-8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

The re-telling of this story is intended to 'affect' the reader as well and the passage acts as a model on which the reader is invited to base his or her own response. Equiano's story at this point in his narrative is almost certainly true but the manner of its telling owes much to the discourse of sensibility. The emphasis on tears is one sign, but the story is also a sentimental parable with Equiano and his sister appearing in the roles of sentimental hero and heroine. Equiano proceeds from here into a textbook example of emotional subversion of the intellect. He describes how his sister was finally 'torn from me for ever' and how the separation left him in a state of depression. These emotionally charged scenes give way to progressively harder nosed forms of rhetoric. The description of his emotional state after their separation leads into a heartfelt apostrophe to his sister: 'thou dear partner of all my childish sports! thou sharer of my joys and sorrows!' He again returns to his emotional state lamenting that 'the thoughts of your sufferings have damped my prosperity' before ending with a prayer and a hard-hitting declamation:

To that heaven which protects the weak from the strong, I commit the care of your innocence and virtues, if they have not already received their full reward; and if your youth and delicacy have not long since fallen victims to the violence of the African trader, the pestilential stench of a Guinea ship, the seasoning in the European colonies, or the lash and lust of a brutal and unrelenting overseer.⁷⁹

Clearly, the separation from his sister was a traumatic event for Equiano, quite deserving of the strength of this rhetorical outburst. The outburst is a carefully controlled one, however, and one which moves effortlessly from the tearful domestic scenes at its opening to a reasoned and structured closing attack on the whole of the system of Atlantic slavery. In telling the history of his separation from his sister Equiano has already provided a sentimental parable for the reader to weep over and by this point he or she should be responding emotionally rather than intellectually. In the final sentence of this passage he begins with a prayer which alludes to that most affecting ceremony, the Anglican 'Order For the Burial of the Dead'. Here he commits his sister's soul to heaven while actually raising questions

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

about the terrestrial status of her body. Reminding us of her 'innocence and virtues' he proceeds to describe what Carretta calls 'the four stages of the African slave trade': capture, the middle passage, seasoning and enslavement.⁸⁰ This movement is the key to Equiano's use of sentimental subversion of the intellect. The stages of the slave trade he describes were well known by the time *The Interesting Narrative* appeared. Here they are referred to while we are holding in our mind the image of a tearful young girl, a girl who is portrayed as having the same feeling response to adversity as any young woman in an eighteenth-century middle or upper-class home. In our emotionally subverted state we link the emotional image of the abused child with our pre-existing intellectual understanding of the nature of the slave trade. The result should be a strong and, perhaps more importantly, a lasting abhorrence of slavery and the slave trade. But in case we have still not quite grasped the horror of the situation Equiano finishes with the most disturbing image of all, the 'lash and lust of a brutal and unrelenting overseer'. Here the circle is completed with the journey from the childhood innocence of the young girl, via the workings of the global slavery industry, ending up once more in a recognisable image of a recognisable individual. The passage ends with the brutality and sexual sadism of the overseer encapsulating the horror of slavery as much as the tearful images of the young Equiano and his sister encapsulated the innocence and emotional honesty of the aggrieved citizens of Africa. Though one of only a few such examples in Equiano's work, this is sentimental rhetoric of the very first order.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52n.

Chapter 5

Reporting William Wilberforce

The existence of the British slave trade depended, in the final analysis, on the support of the British Parliament. Accordingly, the focus of the abolition campaign was on persuading Parliament to declare the trade illegal. While local activity was vital in providing a highly audible background noise of revulsion at the trade, it was clear to most observers that the final decision would be taken by a relatively small political clique operating in and around Westminster. Seemingly central to that clique was William Wilberforce, a close personal friend of the Prime Minister, William Pitt, but Wilberforce in reality remained on the periphery of the administration and was not offered a position within the government. Instead, he led the parliamentary campaign to abolish the slave trade. This chapter will examine the major speeches he made in Parliament during the abolition campaign of the 1780s and 1790s.

This examination will bring us to a problem which, though insoluble, will reveal much about parliamentary reportage and rhetorical practice in the late eighteenth century. The problem is that we have no reliable reports of Wilberforce's speeches or, indeed, of any of the speeches made by Members of Parliament in this period. Rather, we have a number of conflicting accounts which in many cases tell us more about the reporter than the reported. This is a problem which has long vexed historians. The journalist Michael MacDonagh, writing in the early years of the twentieth century, was both proud of the achievements his era had made in turning parliamentary reporting into a reliable science and contemptuous of the shortcomings of another age. 'Would the reports of the proceedings in Parliament furnished by *Hansard* today be of any value', he asks, 'if the speeches were supplied, not by a corps of trained shorthand-writers, but by a staff of imaginative romancers?'¹ The romancers he refers to are the early reporters of parliamentary debates during the eighteenth century, writing at first in defiance of the law and,

¹ Michael MacDonagh, *The Reporters' Gallery* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913), pp. 163-4.

after 1771, with Parliament's permission, though not under Parliament's control. These reporters deliberately changed things. Indeed, they saw themselves as literary figures who rendered into fine style the unpolished debates which they heard.

As no definitive reports of Wilberforce's speeches exist we shall contrast variant accounts, not in the hope of establishing the actual words he uttered in Parliament, but rather to see how different reporters, with different audiences in mind, represented the same rhetorical event. In the few places where they unanimously agree we might with some safety talk of 'Wilberforce's words'. In most cases, however, we can make no such assumption. In addition, the story of the development of parliamentary reporting, though not unknown to scholars, is rarely told despite coming in for some reappraisal in recent years, particularly by Dror Wahrman.² In particular, it is now possible to read parliamentary reports in a way which emphasises textual difference, rather than seeking always to discover their true meaning and intention. This chapter, then, will commence with a short historical discussion of the conditions of parliamentary reportage in the late eighteenth century before examining, in chronological sequence, Wilberforce's abolition speeches of the 1780s and 1790s.

Parliament and the Newspapers

Until late in the eighteenth century the standing orders of both houses of the British Parliament made it a breach of privilege to publish reports of their proceedings, a law which though of long precedent had come only to be enforced with any sort of rigour in the turbulent years of the mid-seventeenth century. As early as 1575 a parliamentary commentator had observed that:

² Dror Wahrman, 'Virtual Representation: Parliamentary Reporting and the Languages of Class in the 1790s', *Past and Present*, 136 (August 1992), 83-113.

Every person of the Parleмент ought to keep secret and not to disclose the secrets and things spoke[n] and doon in the Parleмент house, to any manner of person unlesse he be one of the same house: upon pain to be sequestered out of the house, or otherwise punished, as by the order of the house shalbe appointed.³

This advice was not always followed and in 1588 Sir Edward Hobby complained to the Speaker that speeches were being reported outside of the House. He asked that speeches 'be not any of them made or used as Table talk, or in any wise delivered in notes of writing to any person'. The Speaker agreed and 'thereupon, by consent of this House admonition was given by Mr. Speaker in that behalf accordingly'.⁴ Forty years later, in 1626, another Hobby, this time Sir Thomas, complained that a scrivener named Turnor had sold a copy of Parliament's Remonstrance to King Charles I. Turnor was sent for but could not be found. Two years later there is mention of 'a Book in Print, concerning some Proceedings in Parliament', the first mention of printed reports of Parliament. A committee was appointed to examine the offence but no further details are given.⁵

1628 proved to be an important year in parliamentary reporting. Prior to this the *Journal of the House of Commons*, which recorded in manuscript form the actions of the Commons, occasionally recorded the heads of speeches with some indication of which MPs had said what. In the 1620s first King James and then Charles increasingly exercised their right to call for the journals, James famously tearing out those pages which recorded Parliament's protestation in 1621. As relationships between king and Parliament soured the Commons quickly took action to prevent the king finding out exactly who had said what. In April 1628 it was ordered that 'the Entry of the Clerk, of particular Men's Speeches, was

³ John Hooker, *The Order and Vsage of the Keeping of a Parlement in England, And the Description of tholde and ancient Cittie of Fxcester*. [sic] *Collected by Iohn Vovvel alias Hooker gen.tleman*. [No title page, but ESTC gives: London: printed by John Alde and John Cherkewood,? 1575?], p. 42-3.

⁴ *The Journals of all the Parliaments During the Reign of Queen Elizabeth, both of the House of Lords and House of Commons*. *Collected by Sir Simonds D'Ewes of Stow-Hall in the County of Suffolk, Knight and Baronet*. (London: Paul Bowes, 1682), p. 432.

⁵ H CJ, 1 (1547-1628), p. 882, p. 885.

without Warrant at all Times'.⁶ From this time it was in theory impossible for anyone, especially the king, to find out the opinion of any individual within Parliament. In practice this act of parliamentary solidarity was not always successful, nor was it really put to the test at this time as Charles dissolved Parliament early in 1629 and it did not meet again until 1640. However, in January 1641 the secrecy of Parliament was breached and Charles discovered the names of five MPs who spoke against the Royal Prerogative. Charles's action in sending troops to the House of Commons to arrest the five is one of the better known incidents in the early Civil War period. It is also a powerful illustration of the reason why the early-modern Parliament felt such a strong need for secrecy.

From 1628 to 1771 it remained illegal to publish any account of proceedings in Parliament, but this law was obeyed only up to a point. Reports were printed fairly freely during the mid-1640s, for example, when wartime conditions had weakened Parliament's ability to control the press (and when Parliament had a strong interest in promoting its agenda) but in August 1655 Oliver Cromwell reimposed strict censorship allowing just two newspapers to be published, both edited by Marchamont Needham.⁷ Later in the century, in 1681, Parliament authorised the daily printing of *Votes and Proceedings* but this publication was concerned only with actions. Words spoken in either house were still subject to the strictest secrecy. The revolution of 1688 a few years later, rather than make Parliament feel more secure, seemed only to strengthen their resolve to prevent publication of speeches.⁸

The early eighteenth century saw the laws on parliamentary publication systematically flouted for the first time. There are a number of reasons for this, in particular, consumer-led demand for political gossip and information from the clientele of the London coffee houses. Also important was producer-led demand for copy to fill the pages of the magazines then gaining in popularity, particularly

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 885.

⁷ Samuel Rawson Gardiner, *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate, 1649-1660*, 3 vols (London: Longmans, Green, 1894-1901), III, pp. 234-236.

⁸ Bob Harris, *Politics and the Rise of the Press: Britain and France, 1620-1800* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 6-9.

from the 1730s. The first of these to carry parliamentary business was *The Political State of Great Britain*, published by Abel Boyer from 1711 to his death in 1729 and continued by others until 1737. In this publication appeared details of proceedings in Parliament, mostly cribbed from the official *Votes and Proceedings*, alongside the occasional summaries of speeches. Surprisingly, perhaps because its small circulation did not appear threatening, Parliament took no action.

In 1731 Edward Cave launched *The Gentleman's Magazine*. Cave famously promised in the introduction to the first volume to 'treasure up, as in a magazine, the most remarkable pieces on the subjects above mentioned'. His list of subjects was compendious but did not then include parliamentary proceedings. These were first printed, under the title 'Parliamentary Intelligence', in issue five.⁹ The early reports consisted mainly of plagiaries from both *Votes and Proceedings* and *The Political State of Great Britain* and did not include reports of actual debates but, in little more than a year, Cave diversified to include these as well. As a precaution against prosecution he disguised the names of the speakers, but not heavily. It would have given his readers little difficulty to work out who, for example, was referred to by 'Sir R—t W—le'. The chief parliamentary reporter on the magazine was Cave himself, but the reports were polished by William Guthrie and, after 1738, by the young Samuel Johnson. It also seems likely that some MPs and Lords sent copies of their speeches along to Cave, again after 1738. The parliamentary reports were popular and Cave's formula was quickly followed by others, in particular by Thomas Astley who published *The London Magazine* from 1732. To nip this proliferation of parliamentary reportage in the bud, or at least to prevent the growth from running to seed, the Commons decided to take action against the magazines in 1738.¹⁰ After some debate a resolution was passed which gave journalists and publishers the clearest indication of the Commons' view on the matter to date. This stated:

⁹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1 (1731), 211-15.

¹⁰ Carlson, C. Lennart, *The First Magazine: A History of 'The Gentleman's Magazine', With an Account of Dr. Johnson's Editorial Activity and of the Notice Given America in the Magazine* (Providence, RI: Brown University, 1938), p. 95 and MacDonagh, *Reporters' Gallery*, pp. 128-35.

That it is an high Indignity to, and a notorious Breach of the Privilege of, this House, for any News Writer, in Letters, or other Papers (as Minutes, or under any other Denomination), or for any Printer or Publisher of any printed News Paper, of any Denomination, to presume to insert in the said Letters or Papers, or to give therein any Account of, the Debates, or other Proceedings, of this House, or any Committee thereof, as well during the Recess as the Sitting of Parliament; and that this House will proceed with the utmost Severity against such Offenders.¹¹

This comprehensive injunction might well have been expected to prevent all future reports from Parliament but the magazines soon found a loophole. In May 1738 *The London Magazine* started to print the ‘proceedings of a political club’ whose illustrious members included the Hon. Scipio Africanus and M. Tullius Cicero. This club was ostensibly made up of ‘a few young Gentlemen belonging to the Inns of Court’ who devoted their time to debating issues of the day.¹² A month later *The Gentleman’s Magazine* announced that:

We doubt not but our Readers will be much pleased with an Appendix to Capt. GULLIVER’S Account, which we received last Month, and which the late Resolution of the House of Commons, whereby we are forbidden to insert any Account of the Proceedings of the *British Parliament*, gives us an Opportunity of communicating in their Room.¹³

This appendix to *Gulliver’s Travels* proved to be devoted to ‘debates in the Senate of Magna Lilliputia’, a bicameral legislature whose upper house, the House of Hurpes, and lower house, the House of Clinab, seemed eerily familiar. The chief players; Sir Rubs Walelop, Hurgo Toblat, Pulnub, and Plemahn (representing Walpole, Talbot, Pulteney, and Pelham respectively) were easy enough to identify. The minor parliamentarians were less easy to decode and so two years later *The Gentleman’s Magazine* published a key under the ludicrously transparent guise of

¹¹ HCJ, 23 (1737-41), p. 148.

¹² *London Magazine*, 7 (1738), 237.

¹³ *Gentleman’s Magazine*, 8 (1738), 283.

an advertisement for a (non-existent) book of anagrams called the *Anagrammata Rediviva*.¹⁴ Amazingly, they escaped prosecution, perhaps because the magazine, by adopting the language of a Tory satire on Whig politics to represent actual Whig politics, had created a legal and political minefield. It could have been a severe embarrassment to the administration to have had their Swiftian alter egos dignified by a court of law.

The Gentleman's Magazine and *The London Magazine* had exploited a loophole in the law but sooner or later Parliament was bound to tire of the two publications. Action was once again taken in 1747. In March both magazines had published, in a recognisable form, accounts of the trial and conviction in the House of Lords of Simon Fraser, Baron Lovat. Lovat was a Jacobite Highlander of advanced years who was on trial for the part he played in the Jacobite uprising of 1745. Although there was little support for him in London, there was considerable interest in his trial and to satisfy the market the magazines abandoned their subterfuges and published details of the trial without disguise. In April 1747 Edward Cave and Thomas Astley were apprehended by Black Rod and brought before the bar of the House of Lords where they were tried, reprimanded, and fined.¹⁵ In the same month Lovat was beheaded in front of a large crowd of curious onlookers. While the punishment meted out to the magazine editors was considerably less harsh, it appeared to have the desired effect. Both magazines dropped any form of parliamentary reportage until well into the 1750s, ushering in what MacDonagh calls 'the unreported parliament'.¹⁶ Parliamentary reports returned to the magazines only slowly and hesitantly, with reports of debates often appearing several months after the debates had taken place. Their impact on daily politics was therefore minimal.

Events of the late 1760s and early 1770s prompted a shift in publishers' attitudes towards the standing orders. The Middlesex elections of 1768-9 in which John

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9 (1739), 699.

¹⁵ HLJ, 27 (1746-52), pp. 107-109.

¹⁶ MacDonagh, p. 168. The final 'Report from the Senate of Lilliput' appeared in October 1746; *Gentleman's Magazine*, 16 (1746), 511-518.

Wilkes was repeatedly elected to Parliament and then expelled led to a considerable upsurge in public interest in the proceedings of Parliament. While the Wilkes camp held the view that the 'liberty' for which they stood demanded freedom of the press, newspaper proprietors were not slow to notice that there was commercial advantage in feeding a public appetite for parliamentary reports. Accordingly, from 1768 onwards, a number of newspapers started to print accounts or sketches of parliamentary debates. In January 1770 many of the magazines expanded their coverage to provide what they claimed were full reports of debates. By the autumn of that year many of the daily, weekly and tri-weekly newspapers were publishing full reports as well.

In the spring of 1771 the House of Commons again took action. The printers of a number of newspapers were summoned to appear before the Bar of the House of Commons. Most did and gave promises to stop publishing parliamentary reports. However, three printers took refuge in the City of London, whose authorities refused to hand them over to Parliament, and from where they continued to publish reports of debates. In the crisis of the following weeks Parliament had the Lord Mayor of London and an alderman imprisoned in the Tower for refusing to hand over the printers, but with the start of the Easter recess was forced to release them. The City authorities made it clear that they would follow the same course of action in the future and the House of Commons decided to accept the situation rather than embroil itself in repeated displays of its own powerlessness. From this point onwards printers were free to produce reports of debates in the House of Commons.¹⁷ Perhaps anticipating the way things might go, the House of Lords circumvented the legal difficulties surrounding the enforcement of its standing orders and followed the simple course of excluding all strangers including MPs. Thus from 1770 to 1774 there are few accounts of debates in the Lords. Late in 1774 the Lords voted to reverse this policy, possibly because of the hostile

¹⁷ The Commons did retain the right of excluding strangers (non-Members), a right which was occasionally used to prevent reports being made of sensitive debates, especially, but not exclusively, in wartime.

reception it had received in the press. After 1774 the newspapers could report comparatively freely from both houses of Parliament.¹⁸

Early parliamentary reporters worked in conditions which were far from ideal. The gallery was frequently packed, sometimes noisy and, when a particularly interesting debate was taking place, could verge on the riotous. Visibility was limited as the eighteenth-century House of Commons had no specially constructed press gallery, while the public gallery which reporters used overhung the Members' benches, often leaving it unclear which Member of Parliament was speaking. Neither was it always clear what was being said: eighteenth-century newspapers frequently found it necessary to apologise for a gap in their coverage due to the inaudibility of a Member of Parliament. To make matters worse, reporters were initially prevented from taking any notes, although it appears that this prohibition was short lived. Note taking became acceptable, though for some reason not at the front row of the gallery, after 1783. Even then notes were taken longhand and it was not until the second decade of the nineteenth century that shorthand was adopted. Furthermore, reporters were prevented from discovering, and therefore revealing, which way individual Members had voted, as the gallery was cleared during a division, a practice which continued into the 1850s. Consequently, it is now difficult to establish how any individual Member voted. Finally, the report a journalist brought back to his newspaper was likely to suffer further mangling at the hand of the editor, not least because of the severe constraints on space in eighteenth-century newspapers. In short, a large number of factors conspired to make it unlikely indeed that a report of a debate would bear much resemblance to the debate that had actually taken place.¹⁹

¹⁸ For detailed discussion of the start of reporting of the House of Commons see Peter D.G. Thomas, 'The Beginning of Parliamentary Reporting in the Newspapers, 1768-1774' *English Historical Review*, 74 (1959), 623-36. For the House of Lords see William C. Lowe, 'Peers and Printers: The Beginnings of Sustained Press Coverage of the House of Lords in the 1770s', *Parliamentary History*, 7 (1988), 240-56.

¹⁹ Two useful and influential works on the relationship between Parliament and the newspapers in the eighteenth century are: A. Aspinall, *Politics and the Press c. 1780-1850* (London: Home & Van Thal Ltd, 1949), and A. Aspinall, 'The Reporting and Publishing of the House of Commons Debates 1771-1834', in ed. A.J.P. Taylor and Richard Pares, *Essays presented to Sir Lewis Namier* (London: Macmillan, 1956), pp. 227-57. Michael MacDonagh's strong (if Whiggish) narrative captures the imagination although the details are frequently inaccurate. It should therefore be approached with caution. Other useful works include R.R. Rea, *The English Press in*

If reports of debates were unreliable there were at least plenty to choose from. Parliamentary politics seems to have appealed far more widely in the late eighteenth century than at any time since, so much so that newspapers would on occasion devote an entire issue, to the exclusion even of advertisements, to coverage of a single parliamentary debate. Whether this is because politics and politicians were held in higher esteem than now is debatable. More probably it reflects the novelty of parliamentary reporting after the breakthrough of 1771-1774. In either case, for most of the late eighteenth century and for the early years of the nineteenth, the market was very nearly swamped with parliamentary reports of variable length and quality. In the first place there were newspaper reports. London newspapers in this period appeared daily, weekly, or tri-weekly and after 1771 all except the court circular publication, *The St. James's Chronicle*, carried some sort of report of proceedings in Parliament. Dozens of titles were available, many surviving for just a few months or years while some, like *The Times* and *The Observer*, are still with us. Newspapers were required to be printed on stamped paper and the tax of 3½d per stamped sheet was clearly intended to prevent newspapers achieving a mass readership. Most newspapers retailed at 6d which was as much as a half of the daily income of the poorest in the late century. But the number of titles available suggests that the market for news was buoyant. Moreover, newspapers were widely available in inns and coffee-houses. They were often passed down to domestic servants and from them to friends and relatives. As a last resort they could be rented by the hour. Readership, therefore, appears to have been fairly wide.

The parliamentary reports themselves had the advantage that they appeared very soon after the debate which they reported, in many cases just a few hours afterwards. They suffered, however, by being (usually) the work of just one correspondent who was not, as we have seen, always in the best position to hear

Politics, 1760-1774 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), George Boyce, James Curran, and Pauline Wingate, *Newspaper History: From the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day* (London: Constable, 1978), and Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1987).

the speeches he reported. Details of speeches were then often changed for political reasons as well as practical ones, and editors could—and did—cut reports to make them fit the space available in their newspaper, or to fit their political views. Accounts of parliamentary speeches varied widely from one newspaper to another and readers often needed to consult a number of papers to compile anything approaching an accurate picture. This may well have been the opportunity for a social occasion, as Jane Austen suggests in *Northanger Abbey*, largely written in the last years of the eighteenth century. The setting may be Bath, but Mr. Allen still has a variety of newspapers to choose from. His day begins when he, ‘after drinking his glass of water, joined some gentlemen to talk over the politics of the day and compare the accounts of their newspapers’,²⁰ It is probable that as well as comparing varying editorial comments, Mr. Allen and his acquaintances are comparing different accounts of the actual parliamentary speeches in an attempt to arrive, by a process of comparison, at the nearest thing they can to an accurate picture of the debate.

While newspapers brought relatively speedy news to a curious public there are few indications that they were valued in any way as lasting records of current events. The antiquarian Charles Burney was one of a very small number of people who considered it worth while to save newspapers. His collection now forms an archive at the British Library, but even so it is far from complete. The magazines, in contrast with the newspapers, saw themselves as repositories of all that was worth saving (some would say plagiarising) from the newspapers and other fugitive publications. As we have seen, magazines led the way in reporting parliamentary proceedings and once the newspapers had established their right to follow suit the magazines entrenched their own market position by claiming to provide full and unabridged accounts of speeches, in opposition to the newspapers. That these magazine accounts were rather less than full is amply demonstrated by the emergence, in the 1770s, of periodicals entirely dedicated to parliamentary reporting.

²⁰ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818), ed. Anne Ehrenpreis (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 90.

There were several such periodicals, not all of which have survived in their entirety, and which varied considerably in the quality (and quantity) of their reportage, for much the same reasons as newspapers did. The first of these periodicals to appear was *The Parliamentary Register*. This was published by John Almon who had been quick to leap on the parliamentary band-wagon in 1771 and had from then on produced a short sketch of parliamentary business for *The London Evening Post*. *The Parliamentary Register*, which first appeared in 1774, was the first monthly account of business in Parliament and it continued to appear for twenty-nine years, although Almon was not involved for the whole of that period. In 1781, having made a respectable sum of money from the venture (and from his other publications), Almon retired and sold his business to John Debrett who is now best remembered for his *Peerage and Baronetage*.²¹ Almon had the field to himself, but his successors were not so fortunate. When Almon sold his business to John Debrett a disgruntled employee named John Stockdale set up in business in direct opposition to Debrett, producing his *Parliamentary Debates* which were popular between 1784 and 1790. He was not the only one to enter the field of monthly parliamentary reportage. Between 1790 and 1800 Cooke published *The Senator*, which continued to be published in several different forms by Stratford until 1802.²² Also available was a publication edited by William Woodfall and others called *Impartial Reports of the Debates*, which appeared in thirty-three volumes between 1794 and 1803, and which was usually known as *Woodfall's Debates*. Woodfall was the most famous parliamentary reporter of his time. He wrote for *The Morning Chronicle* between 1774 and 1789 and established *The Diary*, 'the first journal to give reports of parliamentary proceedings the morning after they had taken place'²³

²¹ This started as Edward Kimber's *The Peerage of England* in 1766, was continued by Debrett and is now published every two years under the democratised title of *Debrett's Distinguished People of Today*.

²² The series is: a) *Senator, or, Clarendon's Parliamentary Chronicle* (London: C. Cooke, 1790-96), b) *Senator, or, Parliamentary Chronicle* (London: C. Cooke, 1796-1800), c) *Senator: or Chronicle of the Proceedings and Debates of the Imperial Parliament* (London: W. Stratford, 1801-2).

²³ DNB.

As far as the parliamentary periodicals were concerned 1803 was a year of change. *Senator* went under after a thirteen year history. More importantly *The Parliamentary Register* finished its run after twenty-nine years. Into the void stepped William Cobbett, recently returned from the United States, with a mission to support the Tory government. This mission was not to last long. Within a year he had started his journey towards radicalism, but before he had incurred the hostility of the government he had firmly established both his newspaper, *The Political Register*, and his parliamentary periodical, *The Parliamentary Debates*, which was the only monthly periodical after 1803 to concentrate on proceedings in Parliament. In 1806 he decided to backdate his parliamentary reports and began publication of *The Parliamentary History of England from the Norman Conquest in 1066 to the year 1803*. This ambitious project appeared in 36 volumes between 1806 and 1820. Before this was completed Cobbett, for financial reasons, had already transferred (in 1812) responsibility for parliamentary debates to his printer Thomas Curson Hansard, the son of the Luke Hansard who had been printing *The Journals of the House of Commons* from 1774.²⁴ Hansard's *Parliamentary Debates* became more and more closely identified as the 'official' report throughout the nineteenth century and in 1908 it was nationalised. *Hansard*, now known as *The Official Record*, produces a report which 'though not strictly verbatim, is substantially the verbatim report, with repetitions and redundancies omitted, and with obvious mistakes corrected'.²⁵ Since 1978 reports have been broadcast on radio and, since 1989 (1985 in the Lords), on television.²⁶

The parliamentary periodicals of the late eighteenth century are interesting now for a number of reasons. Firstly, though in the eighteenth century produced for purely commercial reasons, they were the precursors of the official transcripts of parliamentary debates. Secondly, though arguably no more reliable than the

²⁴ These had been kept in manuscript form from 1547 but were not printed until 1742. Parliament gave the initial contract to Samuel Richardson.) There are a number of famous biographies of Cobbett including: G.K. Chesterton, *William Cobbett* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1926), Asa Briggs, *William Cobbett* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), and Raymond Williams, *Cobbett*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

²⁵ J.C. Trewin and E.M. King, *Printer to the House: The Story of 'Hansard'* (London: Methuen, 1952), pp. 261-2.

²⁶ David Davis, *A Guide to Parliament*, Revised edn (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 2.

newspapers, their accounts were always much fuller, often because they presented an amalgam of several different newspaper reports. In many cases they were also able to incorporate material from copies of speeches which were edited by and printed for the Member of Parliament concerned. Thirdly, appearing sometimes several years, and normally at least a month, after the debates which they reported they in general display a more polished account of the speeches. For these reasons historians have tended to use parliamentary periodicals rather than newspapers as sources for writing political history, a strategy that is in many ways deeply problematic. Even more problematic has been a tendency by some historians to look only at Cobbett's *Parliamentary History*, and to endow it with the same sort of status which is now accorded to *Hansard*. This is a dangerous strategy for while *Hansard*, at least from 1908, claims to be a largely verbatim account of what was actually said in Parliament, *The Parliamentary History* made no such claims.

With such a multiplicity of parliamentary reports appearing in the later eighteenth century, and with so little to reassure the researcher that what he or she is reading is actually what was said, it is not surprising that even professional researchers have had moments of confusion over what to read and whom to believe.²⁷ This is not just a problem for historians. Contemporaries too were exasperated by what they perceived as misrepresentations of the words they had spoken in Parliament, a problem rendered all the more acute since there was no 'official' record to which they could turn. Amongst others William Wilberforce complained on a number of occasions that his speeches had been badly reported.²⁸ In December 1798 he raised the matter in Parliament. According to Cobbett's *Parliamentary History* national security appeared to be amongst his worries:

He entertained little doubt that the object of some of the parliamentary reports to which he referred, was, to aim a blow at the constitution, by means of an

²⁷ A good example relevant here is by Rob n Furneaux who, in his book *William Wilberforce* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974), refers indiscriminately to '*Hansard*' for the whole of Wilberforce's parliamentary career. He is referring to Cobbett's *Parliamentary Debates* for the years after 1803 and to *The Parliamentary History* for the years before 1803, but he has conflated the two publications and grouped them under this anachronistic title.

²⁸ See Robert Isaac and Samuel Wilberforce, *Life of William Wilberforce*, 5 vols (London: John Murray, 1838), II, p. 323-4 and III, p. 75.

attack on that House and its members. [...] He had thought for years past that that there existed a studied design to misrepresent, and even to vilify the members and their proceedings.

He considered newspapers to be the worst offenders:

Some of those vehicles had contented themselves with merely stating, that some honourable member had made a very able or eloquent speech, whilst the speech of another, in opposition to it, had been given at great length. The evident design of this was to bias the public mind against their constituents.²⁹

The paranoia is understandable. Britain was at war with France and, in the mind of a conservative like Wilberforce, faced an even more serious threat from home-grown radicals and Jacobins. But despite the support many newspapers gave to both the abolition movement and the government, Wilberforce continued to distrust the press. Five years later he made his exasperation clear in an exchange on the subject he had with Hannah More:

‘We hear a great deal of a famous speech of yours and Sheridan’s,’ writes Mrs. Hannah More, ‘so much that we regret that our economy had cut off the expense of a London paper.’ ‘You talk of my speech,’ he answers; ‘whatever it was, the newspapers would have given you no idea of it. Never was any one made to talk such arrant nonsense, and on a subject too on which I wished not to have been mistated.’³⁰

Modern historians too have had problems with their reconstructions of parliamentary debates, a point explored by Dror Wahrman in his 1992 essay ‘Virtual Representation’. Rather than sticking close to reports offered by a single newspaper or periodical, as most historians have done, Wahrman draws attention to the number of different sources for late-eighteenth-century parliamentary

²⁹ *Parliamentary History*, 34 (1798), col. 110.

³⁰ R.I. & S. Wilberforce, *Life*, III, p. 75.

debates, and notes that in some cases newspapers and periodicals offer entirely contradictory reports of speeches given by the same Member of Parliament. He argues that:

Representations of the proceedings of the British parliament in the press were in fact distinct reconstructions, which were mediated through rhetorical practices specific to each newspaper and dependent on its political convictions. Therefore, as far as the public in Britain was concerned, there was no single image of parliament available to and shared by everyone. Instead the public was confronted with a plurality of representations, in which diverging political languages were employed to address differently formulated concerns.³¹

Wahrman goes on to explore some of the ways in which historians have fallen into the error of believing that the source which they are examining is a full and unbiased representation of the debate under consideration:

Cobbett's *Parliamentary History* and Debrett's *Parliamentary Register* have become almost universally accepted as the best (because seemingly the most complete), if not semi-official, accounts which can then be read as unproblematic, even if not perfect. Of course for many purposes this is a perfectly adequate procedure. But it is unsatisfactory when attention is being drawn to the rhetoric and mode of argumentation of parliamentary debate, rather than merely to the narrative of parliamentary proceedings; and it is particularly problematic for studying charged and contested notions.³²

Most of the rest of the essay is concerned with a close analysis of the 'language of class' as it was used in the Triple Assessment Bill debates of 1797.³³ Wahrman draws a number of conclusions from this analysis. First, he sees that 'an obvious

³¹ Wahrman, p. 85.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

³³ This debate was over the proposed increase in 'assessed' taxes which were taxes on luxury items such as windows, servants, and carriages. The tax rises were to pay for the war with France.

methodological consequence is a corrective to current historical practice in research on this period [...] especially in the study of argumentation and rhetoric.’ But he then makes a far more useful point. Stating that his ‘concern here is *not* a call for a careful analysis [...] to reconstruct cautiously the real proceedings in parliament’, he argues that:

I would like to turn this alleged problem into an advantage. Not often do historians get a chance to compare different, Rashomon-like versions of the same oral event, purporting to represent the same language. By highlighting the points of incongruence and divergence, the contexts in which they occurred and the vocabularies in which they were expressed, rather than attempting to eliminate them in an effort to salvage a single narrative, we can gain insights into the active interaction of ideas and language, as it was played out in the daily practice of politics.³⁴

Wahrman’s invitation to the historian does not yet appear to have been widely accepted but his approach is an intriguing and possibly fruitful one which will be adopted in this chapter. It has the disadvantage only that the sheer mass of material available, and hence the number of different viewpoints to choose from, could easily swamp the researcher, in particular, the researcher who wishes to indulge in the luxury of close reading. For this reason a tight focus must be maintained. While this may tend to obscure the broad view, the reader can rectify any problem to arise from this by having recourse to any one of the existing accounts of late-eighteenth-century parliamentary debates, all of which tend to take a very broad view indeed.

³⁴ Wahrman, ‘Virtual Representation’, pp. 108-9. *Rashomon* is a film (d. Akira Kurosawa, Japan, 1951) in which four people recount different memories of seeing a violent attack on a nobleman.

William Wilberforce and the Speech of 1789

After 1787 the Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade looked towards William Wilberforce for leadership in its parliamentary campaign. Wilberforce came from a prosperous merchant family of Kingston-upon-Hull, a North Sea port which saw little in the way of slave trading. At twenty-one, the youngest age at which one could be so elected, he was returned to Parliament for his native town. Four years later he was again returned to Parliament, this time for the county seat of Yorkshire, which was large and populous, and which therefore required an expensive election contest. The advantage was that the election, being genuinely democratic, conferred a greater legitimacy on the two Members which that county returned to Parliament.³⁵ Wilberforce's early years in Parliament were not untypical for a young back-bencher. He was noted for his eloquence and charm, attributes no doubt enhanced by his considerable wealth, but he did not involve himself at first with any great cause. A sudden conversion to evangelical Christianity in 1785 changed that and from then onwards he approached politics from a position of strict Christian morality. In 1786 he carried through the House of Commons a bill for amending criminal law which failed to pass the Lords, a pattern which was to be repeated during his abolitionist career. The following year he founded the Proclamation Society, which had as its aim the suppression of vice and the reformation of public manners. Later in 1787 he became, at the suggestion of the Prime Minister, the parliamentary leader of the abolition movement.³⁶

³⁵ Wilberforce held this seat until 1812, but finding the workload caused by serving this large county too great he thereafter represented the Sussex pocket borough of Bramber.

³⁶ The first biography of Wilberforce was written by his sons, Robert Isaac and Samuel Wilberforce with the title *Life of William Wilberforce*, 5 vols (London: John Murray, 1838). Two years later they brought out a companion work *The Correspondence of William Wilberforce*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1840). Another volume of correspondence published by a family member appeared towards the end of the century: Anna Maria Wilberforce, *The Private Papers of William Wilberforce* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1897). These volumes maintained the 'official' Wilberforce family line and, particularly in some points of religious heterodoxy, conceal much which their Victorian clergyman editors found unseemly. An early point of departure from the family view was provided by Thomas Clarkson in *Strictures on a Life of William Wilberforce* (London: Longman and Co, 1838). Clarkson's motivation and accuracy are suspect, however, and the book degenerates into personal accusations against the Wilberforce sons. More genial is J.J. Gurney's *Familiar Sketch of William Wilberforce* (Norwich: Josiah Fletcher, 1838) which is one of the last first hand accounts of Wilberforce. Other descriptions appear in the memoirs and biographies of virtually every political figure of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Most of the many twentieth-century biographies have relied heavily on these printed sources.

The story of Pitt's conversation with Wilberforce under an old tree near Croydon has passed into the mythology of the anti-slavery movement. The result was that Wilberforce returned to London having promised to look over the evidence which Clarkson had amassed against the trade. As he did so he clearly became genuinely horrified and resolved to give the abolition movement his support. Working closely with Clarkson he presented evidence to a committee of the Privy Council during 1788. This episode did not go as planned. Some of the key witnesses against the trade, apparently bribed or intimidated, changed their story and testified in favour. In the same year an act was rushed through Parliament by Sir William Dolben which provided for some regulation of the trade, in particular establishing a maximum ratio of number of slaves to ship's tonnage. This certainly prevented some of the worst overcrowding in the middle passage and may have been a genuine attempt to alleviate the conditions experienced by slaves. But equally it may have been an attempt to *depose* criticism of the trade. In this it failed. In the country at large abolitionist sentiment was growing rapidly. While the king's illness and the Regency Bill crisis no doubt supplanted the slave trade as the chief topic of political conversation in the winter of 1788-9, by the spring the king had recovered and abolition was once more at the top of the agenda. It was under these circumstances that Wilberforce prepared to present his Abolition Bill before the House of Commons.

On Tuesday 12 May 1789, Wilberforce rose and began a speech which was widely reported, re-printed, and circulated in reports which differed markedly in emphasis and in many cases are flatly contradictory. This divergence between the reports is found from the outset and two versions of the introductory remarks of Wilberforce's first abolitionist speech serve to illustrate this. Cobbett's *Parliamentary History*, almost certainly accurate in its broad outline of

The most significant are Sir Reginald Coupland, *Wilberforce: A Narrative* (London: Collins, 1923) and Robin Furneaux, *William Wilberforce* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974). Both are sympathetic accounts but while Coupland had no access to any Wilberforce papers Furneaux does return to at least some of the manuscripts. John Pollock in *William Wilberforce* (London: Constable, 1977), revisits, and in many cases visits for the first time, the vast body of Wilberforce manuscripts around the world to produce a detailed and scholarly account, though one clearly sympathetic with Wilberforce's evangelical outlook, which is now the standard biography.

Wilberforce's speech (and nearly identical to the *Parliamentary Register's* account),³⁷ tells us that Wilberforce rose on May 12 and said:

When I consider the magnitude of the subject which I am to bring before the House—a subject, in which the interests, not of this country, nor of Europe alone, but of the whole world, and of posterity, are involved: and when I think, at the same time, on the weakness of the advocate who has undertaken this great cause—when these reflections press upon my mind, it is impossible for me not to feel both terrified and concerned at my own inadequacy to such a task.³⁸

The reporter for *Stockdale's Debates* agreed with the outline, but phrased his report rather differently. Here:

Mr. Wilberforce began with declaring, that when he considered how much discussion the subject he was about to explain to the Committee had occasioned, not only in that House, but throughout the kingdom, and throughout Europe; when he considered, that through the whole of the business, he had courted and anxiously solicited enquiry; when he considered the extent and importance of its object, the variety of interests involved in it, and the consequences that might be the result, he owned he had been filled with apprehensions, lest a subject of such magnitude, and a cause of so much weight, should suffer from the weakness of its advocate.³⁹

These two extracts clearly reflect the same rhetorical event and yet are different in many ways. Both are comprised of a single sentence. Both portray a rhetorical manoeuvre, the *captatio benevolentiae*, in which the orator seeks the good wishes of his audience. The best way to approach this, in the opinion of Cicero, is to employ 'a mild tone, a countenance expressive of modesty, gentle language, and the faculty of seeming to be dealing reluctantly and under compulsion with

³⁷ *Parliamentary Register*, 26 (1789), 130-54.

³⁸ *Parliamentary History*, 28 (1789-91), cols. 41-42.

³⁹ *Stockdale's Debates*, 17 (1789), 206-7.

something you are really anxious to prove.’⁴⁰ We can know nothing about Wilberforce’s ‘countenance’ on this occasion but it is clear that he is following Cicero’s advice in the other three respects, particularly in his protestations of inadequacy for the task. The two versions have other similarities: both share words and phrases such as ‘magnitude’, ‘weakness of the advocate’, and ‘interests involved’, despite ordering them differently which suggests that they were written up from memory or from notes of keywords. Both extracts too catch something of Wilberforce’s nervousness at opening this important debate, a nervousness perhaps beyond rhetorical expediency. Cobbett’s account presents Wilberforce as ‘terrified and concerned’ while Stockdale recalls the MP being ‘filled with apprehensions’. There can be no doubt that both publications are presenting versions of the same speech.

But while the two accounts are similar it is the differences which are more apparent. Cobbett’s version is in the first person while Stockdale maintains a distance between the speaker and the reader by reporting the speech in the third person. Cobbett has Wilberforce considering the ‘magnitude’ of his subject while Stockdale remembers only that Wilberforce considers ‘how much discussion the subject [...] had occasioned’. Cobbett recounts Wilberforce’s progression from ‘this country’, via Europe, to the ‘whole world’. Stockdale sees him move only from ‘the kingdom’ to Europe—omitting, therefore, discussion of Africa—the very country whose ‘wrongs’ Wilberforce sought to redress. Stockdale then has Wilberforce tell us that he ‘had courted and anxiously solicited enquiry’, something which Cobbett does not recall, before moving on, via Wilberforce’s ‘apprehensions’ to his final worry that ‘a subject of such magnitude [...] should suffer from the weakness of its advocate’. The word ‘magnitude’ appears towards the end of Stockdale’s version. It appears at the start of Cobbett’s. Similarly, Stockdale concludes his sentence with the phrase ‘weakness of its advocate’. Cobbett begins the second part of his sentence, directly after the dividing colon, with this phrase.

⁴⁰ Cicero, *De Oratore*, II. xliii. 182. Trans. E.W. Sutton and H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols (London: William Heinemann, 1942), I, pp. 326-9.

These differences can be partly explained by a combination of the physical environment in which the speech was recorded and by the journalistic practices of the late eighteenth century. The reporters, as we have seen, were working without shorthand in an often chaotic and noisy gallery from which visibility and audibility of the chamber was limited. Under these conditions it is understandable that the reconstructed versions would be different. But the form the differences take cannot be accounted for by these factors alone. Instead we must examine eighteenth-century rhetorical practice and note that the reporters are reconstructing Wilberforce's speech according to rules of rhetoric familiar to them. They are arranging the same hastily recorded words and snatches of phrase according to their notion of how the speech *should* have sounded, were it to have been written according to their favourite rhetorical technique.

That these are peculiarly rhetorical reconstructions can be observed by looking at the different unifying principles adopted. Stockdale plumps for repetition, and repeats the phrase 'when he considered' three times, implying that Wilberforce used the phrase 'when I consider' an equal number of times. Cobbett's version adopts a rather different rhetorical trope, antithesis, and complicates the antithesis with a hyperbole which quite possibly destabilises the whole and moves it towards irony. Cobbett's antithesis is simple: the subject under discussion is of great magnitude while its advocate's weakness means the advocate is insignificant. The result, not surprisingly, is the terror of the advocate. But the progression leads towards hyperbole. The Wilberforce represented here moves from 'this country', to Europe and on to the 'whole world', a plausible movement given the global nature of the trade he wishes to outlaw. He then moves a step further for included within this progression is 'posterity' or the future. This progression is all-encompassing as the 'whole world' and 'posterity' together suggest infinity and eternity. Against these little Wilberforce must certainly be 'inadequate', but this exaggeration tends to subvert the whole antithesis from within. It is hard to tell exactly what is meant by this strategy. Wilberforce may genuinely be trying to make us 'well-disposed' towards him. Alternatively, Cobbett's reporter may be attempting to undermine

Wilberforce by reporting his words in this initially beguiling but eventually unstable construction, by altering or emphasising Wilberforce's words to suggest that by overstating his case he damaged the strength of it.

It is, of course, impossible for us to know exactly how Wilberforce began or how he continued his speech.⁴¹ However, this example does indicate the nature of the problem faced by the historian as well as some of the opportunities open to the student of rhetoric. What it does not do is show the extent of the comparable material available. In addition to the two sentences from two different accounts discussed here, there are approximately thirty accounts of this debate, each of them running to several pages. The real problem is not finding the elusive 'true account', an impossibility in any case, but rather narrowing down the area which we wish to examine. We must also note that in selecting the sentimental moments from Wilberforce's speeches we are going to pass over a large quantity of material. Wilberforce's sentimentalism was normally tactical and opportunistic rather than strategic or systematic and he was always a politician before he was an advocate of sensibility. The sentimental passages in his speeches operate as moments of feeling within larger and usually less emotional discourses of law, rights, religion, morality, and economics. An added complication is that while one reporter represents part of a speech as being particularly sentimental, another reporter omits emotional language altogether. In the discussion which follows we shall look at a small number of examples of sentimental rhetoric in Wilberforce's 1789 abolition speech, each from a number of different vantage points, but in so doing we will necessarily omit discussion of many of the several different available reports of those speeches.

Before looking at these various reports it will be helpful to look at a text indisputably authored by Wilberforce to ask whether this text is sentimental in tone and to assess the extent to which he considers emotion, sympathy, and other key

⁴¹ Pollock claims that Wilberforce's notes for this speech are in the Bodleian Library (Pollock, p. 89). The manuscript he refers to is the Bodleian Wilberforce MSS c.4.46 which is headed 'Slaves Cheif Greivances' [sic]. The handwriting is extremely poor but it is clear that this manuscript does not refer to the 1789 speech. The paper itself is watermarked 'Cripps 1816'. It therefore seems likely that this manuscript contains notes for a speech made in Parliament in 1816 or 1817 in support of the Registry of Slaves Bill.

concepts in the discourse of sensibility. By performing this ‘control experiment’ we can better understand whether any sentimentalism we find in reports of his speeches is likely to reflect his own words, or is there as a result of a construction by the reporter. Wilberforce published four books during his lifetime, but as three appeared in the nineteenth century we shall examine only *A Practical view of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes of this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity*, which appeared in 1797, when sentimentalism was not yet an entirely spent force. The book was a work of popular theology with a strong evangelical hue which sold well on publication and throughout the nineteenth century.⁴² Wilberforce had started the book in 1793 as ‘a little tract to give to his friends’, many of whom were puzzled about the nature of his conversion.⁴³ Over the following four years the tract blossomed into a book which was more a series of personal observations on Wilberforce’s notion of ‘true’ religion than a reasoned or closely argued theological work. The book was also odd politically, in that at a time of revolution it appeared to criticise the upper and middle classes rather than the potentially more troublesome working classes. In reality, the book is more socially conservative than the title would suggest. It laments the luxury and love of excess demonstrated by the rich while approving the faithful quietism of the poor. Above all, though, the work is one of personal religion, which drew praise from both high Anglicans and dissenters and may have helped to bring the two camps closer together.

For our purposes the *Practical View* shows us two things. First, that Wilberforce strongly believed in the importance of the ‘feeling heart’ and, second, that he recognised the power of sympathy and saw it as a basic requirement of the

⁴² William Wilberforce, *A Practical view of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes of this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity* (London: T. Cadell, jun. & W. Davies, 1797). It went through 18 English editions between 1797 and 1830. There were editions printed in Dublin and Philadelphia and the book was also translated into French, German, and Spanish. In 1830 an abridged version was produced under the title *Nominal and Real Christianity Contrasted* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1830). Wilberforce’s other books are: *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Addressed to the Freeholders of Yorkshire* (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, J. Hatchard, 1807); *A Letter to his Excellency the Prince of Talleyrand Perigord on the Subject of the Slave Trade* (London: J. Hatchard, 1814); *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the inhabitants of the British Empire: in Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies* (London: J. Hatchard, 1823).

⁴³ Pollock, p. 145.

Christian, an understanding of sympathy which was almost certainly derived from Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The first of these beliefs is amply illustrated by an eighteen page section in the book called 'On the Admission of the Passions into Religion'. A third of the way into this section he writes:

We can scarcely indeed look into any part of the sacred volume without meeting abundant proofs, that it is the religion of the Affectæons which God particularly requires [...] As the lively exercise of passions towards their legitimate object, is always spoken of with praise, so a cold, hard, unfeeling heart, is represented as highly criminal. Lukewarmness is stated to be the object of God's disgust and aversion; zeal and love, of his favour and delight; and the taking away of the heart of stone and the implanting of a warmer and more tender nature in its stead, is specifically promised as the effect of his returning favour, and the work of his renewing grace.⁴⁴

This is a sentimental reading of the Bible, in part because it discusses the role of feelings in religion but also in that it imposes a rather domestic and feminised language not present in the Authorised Version. In Matthew Lewis's Gothic novel, *The Monk*, the 'prudent Mother', Elvira, anxious to preserve her daughter Antonia's innocence, has a version of the Bible 'copied out with her own hand, and all improper passages either altered or omitted'.⁴⁵ Wilberforce does not commit quite such violence on the Biblical text, indeed, these alterations would be blasphemous, but by using paraphrase rather than direct quotation he does manage to soften the uncompromising tone of the original text in a way which might have satisfied Elvira. For example, where Ezekiel has God saying 'I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh', Wilberforce's paraphrase employs the euphemistic circumlocution 'warmer and more tender nature' to avoid the more explicit 'flesh'. Similarly, Wilberforce introduces the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-5. The biblical texts referred to are: 'I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh' *Ezekiel* 11:19, repeated at *Ezekiel* 36:26. 'So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth'. *Revelations*. 3:16.

⁴⁵ Matthew Lewis, *The Monk* (1796), ed. Howard Anderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 260.

phrase 'disgust and aversion' to describe God's reaction to 'lukewarmness'. The text, from *Revelations*, could itself hardly be more disgusting. Here God tells the lukewarm: 'I will spue thee out of my mouth'. The Biblical texts have been domesticated or, to put it another way, couched in language which to the eighteenth-century mind would have been suitable to be read by women of the middle and upper stations. At the same time the readings and their interpretations deal with God's injunctions to man to feel and to feel passionately. Clearly this writing is both sentimental and rhetorical.

Earlier in the book Wilberforce considers the idea of sympathy and postulates that it is an essential tool of Christian forgiveness. This is a rather present-minded exercise for him as the word is not mentioned once in the Bible, although, as we saw in Chapter One, it was a mainstay of eighteenth-century thought. Wilberforce's theology of sympathy starts from the orthodox premise that all men are sinners. It is because we are all sinners, he argues, that we are able to obey the divine injunction to forgive the sins of others and we can do this because of our mutual sympathy. He suggests that we:

Accustom ourselves to refer to our natural depravity, as to their primary cause, the sad instances of vice and folly of which we read, or which we see around us, or to which we feel the propensities in our own bosoms; ever vigilant and distrustful of ourselves, and looking with an eye of kindness and pity on the faults and infirmities of others, whom we should learn to regard with the same tender concern as that with which the sick are used to sympathize with those who are suffering under the same distemper as themselves.⁴⁶

The metaphor is striking. Rather than cast out sinfulness as an abomination we are encouraged to view it as a disease, and a universal one at that. Also interesting is Wilberforce's language, again softening, domesticating, and feminising. Rather than the fulmination so often associated with the evangelical preacher we have the

⁴⁶ Wilberforce, *Practical View*, pp. 51-2.

keywords of sentimental humanitarianism: 'kindness', 'pity', and 'tender concern'. But of greatest interest is Wilberforce's ability to bring in a very eighteenth-century interest in sympathy and bend it to serve the needs of his religion. Later in his book he gives us a clue to one of the influences on his thinking. He complains that 'we read of slaughtered thousands with less emotion than we hear the particulars of a shocking accident which has happened in the next street'. This bears a close resemblance to Adam Smith's discussion of the likely reaction of an Englishman to receiving the news that 'the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake.' This catastrophe, argues Smith, would cause the 'man of humanity' to reflect on the 'precariousness of human life' but:

The most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance. If he was to lose his little finger to-morrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own.⁴⁷

Wilberforce's language and example resemble rather than duplicate Smith's, but they are sufficiently close for us to consider it reasonable that he had in mind *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* at this point. We do know that Wilberforce, in Pollock's words, 'accepted Adam Smith's general principles yet believed these should not be "pushed to a vicious extreme"'.⁴⁸ The principles Pollock mentions here appear to be those found in *The Wealth of Nations*, a book which strongly influenced Wilberforce's close friend William Pitt and which, for this reason and on the evidence of the letter quoted by Pollock, we can safely say Wilberforce had read. We cannot say that Wilberforce had also read the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, but it seems entirely reasonable to suppose that he had. In either case, it seems clear that he was fully paid up to the eighteenth-century school which saw

⁴⁷ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 136-7.

⁴⁸ Pollock, pp. 170-71. The letter he quotes is dated 1800.

sympathy as the paramount force in human relationships. Accordingly, in 1789 he told Parliament that ‘it is sympathy, and nothing else than sympathy, which, according to the best writers and judges of the subject, is the true spring of humanity’.⁴⁹

This observation formed part of the speech made in 1789, the opening lines of which we have already examined. Wilberforce’s strategy was to appeal both to the heads and the hearts of the assembled parliamentarians, something he achieved, it seems, with mixed success. The reporter for *The General Evening Post* praises Wilberforce’s efforts although his report is not uncritical. This newspaper was unusual in introducing its coverage of the debate with some editorial matter which is one of the few contemporary descriptions of the speech we have:

Mr Wilberforce was four hours in delivering his speech against the Slave-Trade, and so eager were the public to hear this important matter discussed, that the gallery of the House was nearly filled by eleven o’clock, and there were near 350 Members present. In the pathetic parts, this gentleman shone with peculiar eloquence;—in the argumentative, he was nervous and powerful;—but in the part of calculations he was several times at a loss. Upon the whole, however, it was allowed by both sides of the House, that it was one of the best speeches ever delivered in Parliament.⁵⁰

The report which follows is a frustrating one as it carefully omits all of the ‘pathetic’ and most of the ‘argumentative’ sections of Wilberforce’s speech in favour of a rather harsh representation which emphasises the offending ‘calculations’ (by which the newspaper means statistical evidence). This version of the speech does Wilberforce and his cause no favours. It leaves the reader unmoved by the (absent) emotional parts and unimpressed by what remains, in this case intellectual arguments that are not always watertight even when they are

⁴⁹ *Parliamentary History*, 28 (1789-91), col. 49. This part of his speech went unnoticed by most other reporters although it did appear in a slightly changed form in *The Morning Star*, 78 (Wednesday 13 May 1789) and in R.I. & S. Wilberforce, *Life*, I, p. 219.

⁵⁰ *General Evening Post* (Tuesday 12-Thursday 14 May 1789).

broadly correct. This strategy, which allowed the paper to be superficially respectful to Wilberforce while rubbishing abolition, was employed by several newspapers. Of those that followed this path only *The General Evening Post* could make any sort of a claim to impartiality in its reporting as it was the only newspaper to preface its report with a statement which claimed that the pathetic and eloquent parts contributed to making this 'one of the best speeches ever delivered in Parliament'. It is not a claim which is well supported by its synopsis of his speech.

Beilby Porteus, the evangelical Bishop of London whose collection of abolitionist literature can now be found at the University of London Library, would certainly have agreed with the last part of the editorial view of *The General Evening Post*. Writing almost fifty years after the event, the Wilberforce sons, in the biography of their father, quote Porteus as saying that Wilberforce's effort was 'one of the ablest and most eloquent speeches that was ever heard in that or any other place'.⁵¹ The quotation is a useful one to Wilberforce's first biographers as it characteristically allows them to say what they wish to say without intruding themselves into the narrative. Their view of their father's 1789 speech is understandably sympathetic and interestingly the sections they choose to reproduce are amongst the most sentimental. Their entire discussion of the speech runs as follows:

The speech with which he opened the debate argued forcibly the whole question. After attempting to disarm the peculiar hostility of the West Indian opposition by describing the trade as a *national* iniquity, he surveyed the various evidence of conflicting testimony, and traced the destructive effects of the trade on Africa, its victims, and the colonies. These arguments were invested throughout with the glow of genuine humanity, and enforced by the power of a singular eloquence. Although the principle record of its excellence must be found in its effect upon that audience of orators to whom it was addressed; yet there are portions which even in the barrenness of extract from 'a most inaccurate Report' retain much of their original beauty. Knowing

⁵¹ R.I. & S. Wilberforce, *Life*, I, p. 220.

‘that mankind are governed by their sympathies,’ he addressed himself to the feelings as well as the reason of the House; and we can even yet perceive the vigour of description which records the sufferings of the middle passage, ‘so much misery crowded into so little room where the aggregate of suffering must be multiplied by every individual tale of woe;’ and the force of that appeal which, after disproving the alleged comforts of the miserable victims, summoned Death as his ‘last witness, whose infallible testimony to their unutterable wrongs can neither be purchased nor repelled.’⁵²

While the exact source of the ‘most inaccurate report’ used by the Wilberforces is unclear, their dismay at the imperfect record handed down to them is perfectly evident. Yet despite the ‘barrenness’ of the account before them the Wilberforces, even at a distance of fifty years, have been especially moved by one short passage which in emotional terms discusses sympathy, suffering, and death. This passage, in which Wilberforce discusses the middle passage, is rather problematic in that it is reported significantly differently in a number of different publications. It appears to have been a highly ornate piece of rhetoric displaying a number of complex rhetorical figures and arguments while being at the same time a sustained piece of pathos designed to catch at the hearts of the listener.

As we have seen, historians frequently quote uncritically from Cobbett’s *Parliamentary History*, as if Cobbett were the best or even the only source for eighteenth-century parliamentary reportage. While this is not true, Cobbett’s accounts are useful for two reasons: firstly because they were collated by reference from a number of different sources and secondly because Cobbett attempted objectivity. ‘In a Work of this nature’, he informed his readers, ‘the utmost impartiality is justly expected; and it is with confidence presumed, that a careful perusal of the following pages will convince the reader, that that impartiality has been strictly and invariably adhered to’.⁵³ So, while Cobbett’s accounts are far from perfect, they can usefully be employed as a starting point against which to

⁵² *Ibid.*, I, pp. 218-19.

⁵³ *Parliamentary History*, 1, ‘Preface’.

measure other interpretations of the same speech. Here is how the *Parliamentary History* reports the part of Wilberforce's 1789 speech in which he discusses the middle passage, an episode about one third of the way in. At this point Wilberforce has completed a rather long introduction and is now examining the evidence given by a Mr. Norris, who was one of the Liverpool slave traders who had given evidence in favour of continuing the trade. Wilberforce begins to conclude this part of his speech thus:

The song and the dance, says Mr. Norris, are promoted. It had been more fair, perhaps, if he had explained that word promoted. The truth is, that for the sake of exercise, these miserable wretches, loaded with chains, oppressed with disease and wretchedness, are forced to dance by the terror of the lash, and sometimes by the actual use of it. 'I,' says one of the other evidences, 'was employed to dance the men, while another person danced the women.' Such, then is the meaning of the word promoted; and it may be observed too, with respect to food, that an instrument is sometimes carried out, in order to force them to eat which is the same sort of proof how much they enjoy themselves in that instance also.⁵⁴

Wilberforce takes a deliberately sensationalist tack here, but he mixes sensation with irony. We find out that Norris's use of the word 'promoted' is a euphemistic one. While promotion usually implies some sort of freedom of choice, Norris's slaves are violently coerced. Wilberforce draws a strong contrast between the image favoured by the slave traders and the reality of the middle passage. Norris's depiction of the slaves singing and dancing on board ship seems intended to bring to mind the pastoral pleasures of village swains dancing around the maypole.⁵⁵ Reality, its antithesis, is quite dreadful. The slaves, 'loaded with chains, oppressed with disease and wretchedness' are ordered to dance under the threat of severe violence. This exercise removes all agency from the slaves, who no longer even

⁵⁴ *Parliamentary History*, 28 (1789-91), col. 47.

⁵⁵ In Cobbett's version, Wilberforce earlier quotes Norris as saying 'Before dinner, they are amused after the manner of their country. The song and the dance are promoted... the men play and sing, while the women and girls make fanciful ornaments with beads, which they are plentifully supplied with.' *Parliamentary History*, 28 (1789-91), col. 46.

dance for themselves but are ‘danced’ by another, bringing to mind macabre imagery of puppeteers pulling the strings of their helpless captives. But here the strings are the cords of the cat o’ nine tails. ‘Such’, indeed, ‘is the meaning of the word promoted’. The reader (or listener) may want to pause here, to digest the full horror of the words just passed, but Wilberforce hurries on, immediately bringing in a further horrifying thought to add to the previous one. The slaves, he notes, must sometimes be force-fed. Earlier, Wilberforce had quoted Norris as saying that the slaves ‘have several meals a day; some of their own country provisions, with the best sauces of African cookery; and by way of variety, another meal of pulse, &c. according to European taste.’⁵⁶ Hyperbole such as ‘the best sauces’ is clearly such nonsense that Wilberforce does not find it necessary to refute it directly. Even the most literal-minded politician in a profession which often remained, officially at least, blind to the tropes of its own discourse, could not miss out on this ironic strategy. This passage, then, is horrific and darkly ironic, but it is not sentimental. What follows certainly is:

As to their singing, what shall we say when we are told that their songs are songs of lamentation upon their departure which, while they sing, are always in tears insomuch, that one captain (more humane as I should conceive him, therefore, than the rest) threatened one of the women with a flogging, because the mournfulness of her song was too painful for his feelings.⁵⁷

This passage initially refers to Psalm 137, ‘By the rivers of Babylon’ where ‘they that carried us away captive required of us a song’. Psalm 137 is familiar in the twentieth century primarily as a text drawing attention to the historical legacy of slavery, but for Members of Parliament in 1789 the relationship drawn between the captive Jews and the captive Africans may well have been a new one, particularly if they had not studied the small print of the theological discussions of slavery which had been published in the preceding few years. From this Biblical allusion the passage quickly moves on to an altogether new story, which we could describe as a

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, col. 47.

sentimental parable; the 'Parable of the Captain'. Here we are invited to examine the relationship between fine feeling and actual benevolence in a tale which pointedly attacks the false sensibility exhibited by a slave ship captain while contrasting this with the very real tears and lamentations of the slaves whose sensibility, unlike the captain's, is shown to be real.

The rhetorical strategy followed in this bitterly ironic story works to engage the listener's sensibility and to enable him to distance himself (Wilberforce's parliamentary audience, both in the chamber and in the gallery, was all male) from the patently false sensibility of the slave-ship captain. This cunning rhetorical ploy at once exposes the villainy of the captain while simultaneously flattering the listener, who might first congratulate himself on having interpreted the ironic jibe at the captain's humanity, and secondly congratulate himself on having finer and more honest feelings than the captain. The listener, then, is both alerted to suffering and, through flattery, made more receptive to the argument. But this is also a story about emotional response to cruelty. The captain, perhaps tormented by his own guilt, hits out violently (or threatens to do so) to suppress the outward manifestation of suffering, the lamentation. At the start of his speech Wilberforce had made it clear that he believed the guilt for the cruelties of the slave trade was shared by all members of the British legislature.⁵⁸ The suggestion is that there are two types of members: those who admit this guilt and those who do not. In the Parable of the Captain these two groups are implicitly characterised as the feeling and the unfeeling and here a simple parallel can be drawn between Parliament and the captain. Parliament can either act like the captain, with false sensibility, and ignore the slave-trade, or allow it to grow perhaps more iniquitous. Alternatively it can act with real sensibility and decide to abolish the trade. With this thought fresh in the mind of the listener Wilberforce moves on. The rest of this part of the speech continues:

⁵⁸ 'I mean not to accuse any one, but to take the shame upon myself, in common, indeed, with the whole Parliament of Great Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty—we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others; and I therefore deprecate every kind of reflection against the various descriptions of people who are more immediately involved in this wretched business.' *Ibid.*, col. 42.

In order, however, not to trust too much to any sort of description, I will call the attention of the House to one species of evidence which is absolutely infallible. Death, at least, is a sure ground of evidence, and the proportion of deaths will not only confirm, but if possible will even aggravate our suspicion of their misery in the transit. It will be found, upon an average of all the ships of which evidence has been given at the privy council, that exclusive of those who perish before they sail, not less than 12½ per cent. perish in the passage. Besides these, the Jamaica report tells you, that not less than 4½ per cent. die on shore before the day of sale, which is only a week or two from the time of landing. One third more die in the seasoning, and this in a country exactly like their own, where they are healthy and happy as some of the evidences would pretend.⁵⁹

Wilberforce's rhetorical progression, from ridicule, through horror, sentiment, and irony, abruptly reaches death, a word which is structurally highlighted in Cobbett's account, almost certainly reflecting the emphasis given to it by Wilberforce during the delivery of this speech. The introduction of death marks a turning point, a moment when Wilberforce switches from anecdotal to statistical evidence and only now, after a long section in which the statements of Norris and others are held up for examination, does Wilberforce introduce evidence of his own. He tells us of the 12½ per cent mortality rate on slave ships. Then we get the statistic that 4½ per cent of slaves die waiting to be sold. Worse is to come: another third of the slaves die during the seasoning period. These are truly appalling statistics and by themselves should be enough to convince any parliamentarian to vote to abolish the slave trade. They were not enough. As we know Parliament took another eighteen years to abolish the trade. Wilberforce too was clearly aware of the limitations of hard evidence in the parliamentary forum which is why his statistics come where they do, after a long period in which feelings are to the fore and sentiments are examined. To understand this we must go back a little. Almost at

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, col. 47.

the start of his speech, at least in Cobbett's account, Wilberforce had given his audience an undertaking:

I wish exceedingly, in the outset, to guard both myself and the House from entering into the subject with any sort of passion. It is not their passions I shall appeal to—I ask only for their cool and impartial reason; and I wish not to take them by surprise, but to deliberate, point by point, upon every part of this question.⁶⁰

Wilberforce does not stick to this, as we have seen. However his audience responded to it, the speech itself is not marked for its use of 'cool and impartial reason'. Nor does Wilberforce refrain from taking his audience by surprise. Indeed, the preamble to his presentation of the mortality statistics is particularly full of sentimental language, horrific imagery and surprising revelations and figures of speech. The strategy, however, seems to be quite deliberate. Wilberforce is aiming at emotional subversion of the intellect, a technique which, as we have seen in earlier chapters, was used with particular success by sentimental rhetoricians. Rather than present the statistics in a reasoned and impartial manner (which allows for a detached response) Wilberforce sows confusion and distress (refers to forced dancing and forced feeding) in a rhetorically challenging manner (uses irony). Having gained entrance, so to speak, to the listeners' hearts he makes use of fashionable sentimental language ('tears' and 'lamentation') to present a sentimental parable on the difference between true and false sensibility. By now in complete command of the sensibilities of the House, or at least having forced its Members to examine their own sensibilities, he turns suddenly to apostrophise Death, thus taking his audience by surprise. In the hope now of having completely subverted their intellects by these methods he forces them to accept the empirical part of his argument on emotional terms. Either they have true sensibility and will accept the outrage of the slave trade as a moral problem, or they have false sensibility, will quibble about the numbers and fail thereby to live up to the sentimental ideas of the day. One imagines the most hardened supporters of

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, col. 42.

slavery remaining suspiciously quiet through this part of Wilberforce's speech, perhaps so much so that *The Star* may not have been far wrong when it noted that 'the gallery of the House of Commons on Tuesday was crowded with Liverpool Merchants; who hung their heads in sorrow—for the African occupation of bolts and chains is no more'.⁶¹ The newspaper may have been premature in sounding the death knell of the slave trade, but it is surely accurate in noting that Wilberforce demanded and got a powerful emotional response to his speech.

How, then, are we to assess the view of *The General Evening Post* when it reported that 'in the pathetic parts, this gentleman shone with peculiar eloquence;—in the argumentative, he was nervous and powerful;—but in the part of calculations he was several times at a loss'. The last part of this analysis seems rather unfair, at least on the evidence of the report in Cobbett's *Parliamentary History*. But this was not the only report. As we have already noted, *The General Evening Post's* account of the speech displayed Wilberforce's weaker moments in preference to his stronger ones. Other newspapers had their own emphases and styles of reportage, and the passage which we have just explored was reported in a number of different forms.

One very sentimentalised account appeared in *The Morning Star* newspaper and this is also interesting for the extent to which it differs from the account in *The Parliamentary Register*, which was reproduced by Cobbett in his *Parliamentary History*. This account commences with Wilberforce magnanimously declaring that 'he came not to accuse the merchants, but to appeal to their feelings and humanity', but he also declares that the slave trade 'must make every man of feeling shudder'. The newspaper continues to report Wilberforce's words in this manner:

It was extremely worthy of observation to explain how the *songs* and *dances* were promoted. It was not a scene of freedom or spontaneous joy; for one man was employed to dance the *men*, and another to dance the *women*. If

⁶¹ *Star*, 323 (Thursday 14 May 1789).

they found themselves inclined not to undergo the fatigue, certain persons were ordered to *whip* them into a compliance. To hear a recital of these facts would make people shudder; and the tear of sympathy would communicate from one man to another with congenial celerity. There was one Captain who declared that his feelings revolted at such measures. He applauded highly the sensations of this man, who had made such a concession in defiance of the barbarous practises already described. But DEATH, which on every occasion levels all distinctions, gave the unhappy victims that freedom from persecution and torture which other wise they could not have received.⁶²

The account in *The Morning Star* is shorter than Cobbett's, appropriately for a newspaper article. Newspapers in the late eighteenth century were normally four pages long and parliamentary debates rarely occupied more than one entire page. Reporters were thus compelled to abbreviate the speeches they heard quite considerably. For this reason the reporter for *The Morning Star* presents a much shorter synopsis of the speech, especially in the first three sentences. In the first part of the second sentence in particular we can see how the reporter is merely giving the flavour of the speech without revealing its ingredients. Wilberforce's digression on the force feeding of the slaves, reported by Cobbett at this point, is omitted entirely. But there are agreements over words and phrases such as 'promoted' and 'dance the men' which show that the two reporters were, at least, reporting the same event. However, in the central part of this extract *The Morning Star* reporter manages to disagree sharply with Cobbett about the subject of the speech while agreeing completely about its tone. To examine these points of difference and agreement more closely the two extracts are here placed side by side:

Cobbett's *Parliamentary History*

The Morning Star

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 1 | As to their singing, what shall we say when we are told that their songs are | To hear a recital of these facts would make people shudder; and the tear of |
|---|--|---|

⁶² *Morning Star*, 78 (Wednesday 13 May 1789).

songs of lamentation upon their sympathy would communicate from
 departure which, while they sing, are one man to another with congenial
 always in tears, celerity.

- 2 insomuch that one captain (more humane as I should conceive him, therefore, than the rest) threatened one of the women with a flogging, because the mournfulness of her song was too painful for his feelings
- There was one Captain who declared that his feelings revolted at such measures. He applauded highly the sensations of this man, who had made such a concession in defiance of the barbarous practises already described.

In both cases the first part is marked by the use of sentimental language and in particular by the use of that key sentimental signifier, tears. Were we simply interested in arriving at the best reconstruction of the speech it would be safe to assume that Wilberforce drew attention to tears at this point. What is not clear is who, in Wilberforce's original speech, was doing the weeping. According to Cobbett it is the slaves who 'are always in tears' while they sing 'songs of lamentation upon their departure'. The tears portrayed in *The Morning Star* are rather different. Firstly, they are conditional on the 'facts' which Wilberforce relates becoming publicly known. Secondly, they are shed by Englishmen becoming aware of those facts. *The Morning Star* lays it on a bit thick at this point, almost as if (which is not unlikely) the reporter sitting in the gallery of the House of Commons had jotted down the single word 'tears' at this point and had (re constructed this part of the speech later on by a process of extrapolation from what he already knew of the discourse of tears. Tears are the outward sign of true sensibility and, because external, are a form of communication, a point made by the reporter who notes that these tears 'would communicate from one man to another with congenial celerity'. In its primary eighteenth-century usage the word 'congenial' is synonymous with 'sympathetic' but the now more familiar usage in which it is synonymous with 'agreeable' was far from unusual in 1789. This account of Wilberforce's speech provides an excellent example of sentimental political discourse in that it privileges the response to the suffering of others over

the response of the person who is actually undergoing the suffering. Moreover, it characterises the sentimental response to others' suffering as agreeable, and it provides a mechanism—sympathy—by which the agreeable sentiments are communicated. And at this point *The Morning Star*'s report resembles Cobbett's only in so far as they both mention tears and are conducted in sentimental language.

The second section sees the newspaper report the Parable of the Captain which we discussed earlier. Here, though, the story is entirely different in that the Captain's 'feelings revolted' at the practice of whipping the slaves 'into a compliance'. Moreover, the story is completely free of the irony which characterises Cobbett's version. In *The Morning Star* the captain is genuinely humane, a real man of feeling, and Wilberforce celebrates this. In another sentimental touch Wilberforce is portrayed as applauding the man not for his actions but rather for his 'sensations'. To this reporter the captain's feelings appear to be more important than his actions, an inversion of the Cobbett version in which Wilberforce attacks the captain for intensifying his actions to palliate his own feelings. But the main difference lies in the lack of an ironic strategy to attack the captain in this account. It is possible that the reporter merely failed to catch the irony which Cobbett's reporter recognised, but it is equally possible that no such ironic strategy was used. Most of the daily and weekly newspapers agree (where they mention the story at all) with *The Morning Star* on this point. *The World*, for example, tells this story from the same angle and in particularly sentimental tones:

The *Song*, [Wilberforce] allowed, was often recommended, and by one Captain in particular; but so plaintively impressive were the tones, or so affecting the subject, that seeing the sympathetic tear rising in the eye of each *African*, the Captain ordered them to desist; which he loved the fellow for doing, as it shewed that his feelings had not been thoroughly subdued, even by the inhumanity of his barbarous occupation.⁶³

⁶³ *The World*, 738 (Wednesday 13 May 1789).

The captain in this account is a true man of sensibility, responding sensitively to the 'sympathetic tear' of each of his captives. The slaves, in turn, are sentimentalised. They are treated as feeling human subjects suffering as Wilberforce's audience would suffer and each responding with tears to their own aesthetic productions as much as to the dreadful situation into which they had been forced. This was an aspect of the scene which *The Whitehall Evening Post* found especially attractive:

It was customary, in order to lull [the slaves'] cares, to amuse them with the music of their native land, which never failed to draw tears down their cheeks. One of the Captains seeing this, desired that the musician should desist, for which the honourable Member commended his humanity.⁶⁴

These portraits of a humane and feeling slave captain are not very convincing, and one wonders what rhetorical benefit Wilberforce thought he might derive from looking for instances of humanity in a trade which he otherwise roundly condemned as thoroughly inhumane. On the other hand, these images were fashionable and served to attract the interest of readers of sentimental novels, plays and poetry. How many Members of Parliament would have avowed themselves avid consumers of sentimental literature is a moot point and indeed many would have considered such productions, especially sentimental novels, rather beneath their dignity. The same was not necessarily true of the readers of daily and weekly newspapers. These publications competed in a marketplace which included not only other newspapers and monthly magazines but also works of fiction, sentimental and otherwise. On discovering a section of Wilberforce's speech which could have remotely been described as sentimental it would have done some of the newspapers no harm to reconstruct the speech in a way which more closely allied it with the fashionable discourse. *The Parliamentary Register*, on which Cobbett largely based his account, was a periodical ostensibly, if not actually, dedicated to providing the most accurate account possible of parliamentary proceedings. For this reason, as well as the opportunities its editors had of revising and checking their text before going to print, the periodical may well have been

⁶⁴ *Whitehall Evening Post*, 6551 (Tuesday 12 May-Thursday 14 May 1789).

able to present an account more alert to the ironies and ambiguities in the speech and less dependent on finding a popular audience. This does not necessarily make it more accurate (although it is arguable that it does) but it does mean that a more authoritative and less populist tone could be achieved. For this reason it is possible that the sentiment, the 'pathetic parts' noted as particularly fine by the editor of *The General Evening Post*, have been edited out of this account and, indeed, out of most of the accounts of parliamentary speeches used by historians of the late eighteenth century.

Wilberforce's actual words are not recoverable, but *The Morning Star* had no doubt as to the message. Its account of Wilberforce's speech contains a section overlooked by all other newspapers and reported only in a very different form by Cobbett.⁶⁵ According to the newspaper Wilberforce said that 'We unite with the person of sensibility, that [abolition] is necessary, as founded in rectitude and universal benevolence'. The argument, combining both the language of rights with the language of feeling, sounds more like the newspaper's editorial than the words of the person whom they were ostensibly trying to report. But this section concludes with words similar to those reported by Cobbett. With more than a nod to the sentimental philosophers, *The Morning Star* found it necessary to stress that Wilberforce had said 'that *sympathy is the great source of humanity.*' In this short but crucial phrase is encapsulated the philosophical justification for both the rhetoric and the politics of sensibility and a core argument in Wilberforce's call to abolish the slave trade. It is the imperative of the man of feeling, in this analysis, to oppose the slave-trade because the man of feeling sympathetically feels the pain which the slaves actually suffer. Those who do not feel the pain are both callous brutes and thoroughly unfashionable. This argument, sentimental and modish, significantly appears in only two publications: one which purports to be unbiased and one which makes its abolitionist sympathies plain. By contrast, Wilberforce's sentimental arguments are played down or ignored entirely in publications which advertised a belief in the continuation of the trade in slaves.

⁶⁵ *Parliamentary History*, 28 (1789-91), col. 49.

Wilberforce's Abolition Speeches, 1790-1792

Wilberforce's efforts in May 1789 were in vain, but he pressed on with the campaign. His speeches continued to make use of sentimental rhetoric, in varying degrees, and continued to be reported variously and creatively by the newspapers. Although his 1789 speech alone provides plenty of examples of his and the newspapers' use of sentimental rhetoric it is important to look also, if briefly, at some of the later speeches made in his campaign to note both how he continued to make use of the rhetoric of sensibility and how that rhetoric underwent subtle changes in emphasis. In particular we can note that Wilberforce became less concerned about upsetting the pro-slavery camp with accusations of extreme cruelty and illegal behaviour. Finally, we can observe a subtle but discernible shift away from the language of domestic sensibility and towards a more 'Gothic sensibility' not entirely unrelated to the language of the increasingly popular novels of Anne Radcliffe and others.

After the 1789 speech parliamentary delaying tactics came into play. Further evidence was requested and heard over the summer months and then, on 23 June 1789, the matter was adjourned until the next session. Wilberforce left town, holidaying at Buxton with Hannah More, confident that the next session would see a resolution of the debate and abolition of the trade. It did not and by January 1790 the question was deemed to be taking up so much parliamentary time that consideration of the evidence was moved upstairs (as parliamentary jargon has it) to a Select Committee. Evidence in favour of the trade was heard until April, followed by evidence against. In June Pitt called an early general election. Wilberforce was safely returned as a Member for Yorkshire, but parliamentary business was disrupted. Despite being behind schedule, Wilberforce continued to work for an abolition which it appeared the country wanted. News of the slave rebellion in Dominica reached Britain in February 1791 and hardened attitudes against abolition, but Wilberforce pressed on. After almost two years of delay the

debate finally resumed and Wilberforce again addressed the Commons on 18 April 1791.⁶⁶

According to some accounts of this speech it was even more impassioned than the speech of 1789. *The Senator*, a new parliamentary periodical which published accounts of speeches in the same week that they were made, notes that the speech ‘displayed his thorough knowledge of the subject, his abilities as an orator, and his humanity as a man.’ Later it states that he concluded his speech with ‘a most impassioned and emphatic appeal to the feelings of the Committee’.⁶⁷ Sir William Dolben notes in manuscript reflections on the debate (which he had chaired) that Wilberforce began his speech in a manner which ‘I should think would lay fast hold on the attention of every man who has ears to hear, and a heart to feel’.⁶⁸ Wilberforce’s sons agree in part. They note that he ‘ended with an animated appeal to the religious sympathies of the House.’ But they also tell us that ‘with a careful suppression of irritating topics [he] proved the trade to be as well cruel as impolitic’.⁶⁹ What these irritating topics were we can only speculate, but it is noteworthy that the sentimental rhetoric which appears to have marked his 1789 speech is largely absent from reports of his 1791 speech. This absence seems to have less to do with a change in subject matter than in a change of tone.

Tone of voice is a notoriously difficult quality for the literary critic to pin down, and in this case the examination is hampered by the further difficulty of trying to establish the absence of a particular tone. But all the accounts of this speech present emotional arguments in clear and unemotional language, in particular without reference to tears, sighs and lamentations, although the phrase ‘feeling heart’ occurs in several places in most accounts. The opening pages of the speech present largely anecdotal evidence of atrocities committed by slave traders and, while these seem calculated to emotionally subvert the intellect before the statistical evidence is presented, the tone is not sentimental. Many of the instances

⁶⁶ Pollock, pp. 91-105.

⁶⁷ *The Senator, or, Clarendon’s Parliamentary Chronicle*, II, p. 548, p. 574.

⁶⁸ *Cit.* Pollock, p. 106.

⁶⁹ R.I. & S. Wilberforce, *Life*, I, pp. 298-9.

of suffering outlined here are so awful that the predominant tone is horror rather than sentiment. But in a few places we see a phrase or an argument which strikes us as sentimental. Slaves, Wilberforce argues, will spend any money they earn on their liberty before spending it on any material comfort. He continues by discussing the single exception to this rule:

There was only one instance of a slave's refusing to purchase his liberty, after he was able to do it, and that slave had purchased his *son's*. Unable to pay for the freedom of both, he chose to end his own days a slave, that his last hours might not be embittered by the prospect of leaving his son to pass a life as wretched as his own! And whenever they had more than enough to buy their own liberty, the slaves purchased that of a sister, a brother, or a friend; for scarcely any negro had a heart so hard, as that he could bear to see a fellow creature suffering what himself had borne, if it was in his power to relieve him! A proof of tenderness in a *Savage* which should shame the *Christian* that despises him.⁷⁰

In this account from *The Senator* we have a sentimental parable strongly influenced by the primitivist notion of the noble savage. There is a father who sacrifices himself for his son, a sacrifice which hints at the literary convention of the noble suicide of the aristocratic slave. This action is also a benevolent gesture, as well as being an instance of parental affection, and in this way the father fulfils several of the criteria of the sentimental hero at the same time. It is then clearly signalled that we are to extrapolate a meaning from this allegedly isolated incident and the lesson we are to draw from this parable is made forcefully. Firstly, we learn that Africans are naturally compassionate, few being hard-hearted. Secondly, we learn that Africans are sympathetic to the sufferings of others, or in other words, view the predicament of others with sensibility. Africans are characterised here as natural sentimental heroes, just as they are by James Ramsay and Thomas Clarkson in the anti-slavery texts of the 1780s. Finally, readers are reminded of their own nominal Christianity and shamed with an accusation of hypocrisy and inaction.

⁷⁰ *Senator*, II, p. 566.

This parable is reported in *The Senator*, but is barely recognisable in other publications. Cobbett, again following *The Parliamentary Register*,⁷¹ neglects to tell the story of father and son while noting that:

When [the slaves] thought the little that was left of their own lives not worth redeeming, they would purchase the freedom of a son, a brother, or a sister; thus affording at once a proof of the value they sat [sic] on freedom, and of disinterestedness and social affection, which did honour to the human character.⁷²

This account has become the version most likely to be read by biographers of Wilberforce and historians of abolitionism. It is significantly less sentimental in tone or form than the account in *The Senator* and while this may be in part because *The Parliamentary Register* was written up after a longer interval and so suffered in accuracy, it is more likely that the periodical was seeking to establish a rather more magisterial tone than its competitors. To do this, those sentimental moments in the 1791 speech would have to have been toned down, for amongst the serious-minded the language of sentimental literature was generally frowned upon. Newspapers, more geared up to attracting a popular audience, gave themselves greater scope to employ sentimental rhetoric but in this case the reports are curiously muted and unemotional. Perhaps their editors felt that the public were starting to tire of heady emotions in place of ‘cool and impartial reason’. Or maybe the editors of *Senator* fabricated the sentimental moments in their account. Whatever the answer, one thing alone is clear: the ‘impassioned and emphatic appeal to the feelings of the Committee’, which *The Senator* reported but did not represent, was more in evidence to those present in the House of Commons that night than to those who read about it afterwards.

⁷¹ *Parliamentary Register*, 29, pp. 204-5.

⁷² *Parliamentary History*, 29 (1791-2), col. 266.

When, on the following night, the House divided on the question of abolition fewer than half of its Members remained to vote. Because of this or not, the Abolition Bill fell with a majority of 75 against abolishing the slave trade. Wilberforce and the other members of the Abolition Committee returned to the task of drumming up support for abolition both from Members of Parliament and from ordinary people. More petitions were collected, further meetings held, extra pamphlets published, and a boycott of sugar was organised. The campaign was not helped by news of the revolutions in France and Haiti. Perhaps sensing that a hardening of attitudes was becoming increasingly likely, Wilberforce again brought the question of abolition before the House and, almost a year after the previous defeat, on 2 April 1792, Wilberforce once more found himself addressing the House of Commons. This time there is no doubt about both the emotional pitch he made and the response he got, as every account we have of this speech plainly shows that it was an intense and lengthy emotional harangue. At times Wilberforce's language is sentimental, more often it is passionate and angry. Only occasionally is it that 'cool and impartial' language which Wilberforce had promised, but failed to deliver, in his 1789 speech.

Making a distinction between emotional language and sentimental language can be fraught with difficulty. As we have already seen, making this distinction was also a challenge—or an opportunity—to the newspaper and periodical writers. In 1792, as in 1789 and 1791, reports of the speech varied sharply from one publication to another. As before incidents are reported by one source and neglected by the rest, or reported in very different terms by opponents and supporters. So powerful was Wilberforce's speech on this occasion, however, that a number of his stories were reproduced by almost every publication which covered proceedings in Parliament. Amongst these was a report that several slave-ship captains had kept up a naval bombardment of the African town of Calabar, now in south-eastern Nigeria, in order to force the inhabitants to sell their slaves at a lower price than normal. This 'mockery of all feeling, and [...] insult on the opinions of parliament' so outraged some of the Members present that 'in a sudden burst of indignation' they called upon Wilberforce to name the guilty captains. We are told that he 'resisted for a

long time', however, 'at last the cry overpowered him' and he named five ships and their captains.⁷³

In this highly charged atmosphere Wilberforce embarked upon the following story, illustrative of 'the cruelty of those who dealt in this abominable traffic':

The instance which he should mention was the case of a young girl, fifteen years of age, of extreme modesty, who finding herself in a situation incident to her sex, was extremely anxious to conceal it. The captain of the vessel, instead of encouraging so laudable a disposition, tied her by the wrist, and placed her in a position so as to afford a spectacle to the whole crew. In this situation he beat her; but not thinking the exhibition he had made sufficiently conspicuous, he tied her up by the legs, and then also beat her. But his cruel ingenuity was not yet exhausted, for he next tied her up by one leg, after which she lost all sensation, and in the course of three days she expired. This was beyond dispute a fact. [Name! Name! Name! resounded from all parts of the House.] Captain Kimber was the man.⁷⁴

This allegation was too dreadful to go unnoticed by the newspapers and by political cartoonists. The event was portrayed in a cartoon by Isaac Cruikshank called *The Abolition of Slavery: Or the Inhumanity of Dealers in human flesh exemplified in Capt'n Kimber's treatment of a Young Negro Girl of 15 for her Virgin Modesty* [Figure 8]. Here the event is portrayed in imagery which is highly sexualised. The girl is suspended from her foot, naked except for a red rag around her waist—possibly symbolic of menstruation, surely the 'situation incident to her sex'. The dialogue of the two sailors is loaded with double entendre. The one holding up the girl cries 'dam me if I like it—I have a good mind to let go'. He could be expressing his dislike for the punishment he inflicts, and genuinely wants

⁷³ *Ibid.*, col. 1069.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, cols. 1070-71. Cobbett's version is a slightly altered version of that in the *Parliamentary Register*, 32 (1792), pp. 154-75. *Senator*, IV, p. 510, notes that Wilberforce 'enumerated several instances of cruelty, of which we shall select one'. Their account is nearly identical to that in *The Parliamentary History*.



Figure 8

George Cruikshank, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade, or, the Inhumanity of Dealers in Human Flesh Exemplified in Capt Kimber's Treatment of a Young Negro Girl of 15 for her Virgin Modesty* (1792)

to let the girl down but equally, to 'let go' is a euphemism for reaching orgasm. Another remarks that 'our gurlles at Wapping are never flogged for their modesty.' The girls at Wapping were infamous for being prostitutes and the flogging they underwent may have been as a legally sanctioned punishment for their criminal status but here more probably alludes to their involvement in sado-masochistic practises. In Cruikshank's cartoon the sailors appear to be deriving a sexual charge from their sadistic act of torture, an act of sadism which costs them less money to enjoy here than at Wapping.

This cartoon reflects the considerable public interest taken in Wilberforce's parliamentary accusations against Captain Kimber but it also illustrates that more passions than revulsion were aroused by Wilberforce's description of the scene. According to Mary A. Favret, Wilberforce's strategy on this occasion was a form of emotional rhetoric in which 'abolitionists aimed to arouse the strong passions of the gentlemen of the House' through a form of sado-masochistic pornography in which 'scenes of flogging served as the crucial means of arousal'.⁷⁵ Favret argues that 'the emotional register for the debate, especially in the 1790s, was nearly always the "passions"—the discourse of sympathy had not yet established itself in the cause.'⁷⁶ This observation is clearly inaccurate. As we have seen, sympathy was central to eighteenth-century thought and central to Wilberforce's rhetoric. Moreover, it seems unlikely in the extreme that Wilberforce was deliberately trying to arouse the erotic passions of his audience, even if Cruikshank was. However, Favret is right to note that the story is a form of emotional rhetoric, if not sentimental rhetoric, which 'proved rhetorically effective in prompting the men of England to recognize their power—and desire—to act.'⁷⁷ Whether that desire was an erotic one remains to be seen.

⁷⁵ Mary A. Favret, 'Flogging: the Anti-Slavery Movement Writes Pornography', *Essays and Studies 1998: Romanticism and Gender*, ed. Anne Janowitz (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998), pp. 19-43, pp. 24-5.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39. Favret's argument relies heavily on a single account of Wilberforce's speech—Cobbett's—and provides, therefore, a good example of the pitfalls of basing an analysis of a parliamentary event solely on this one source.

On Thursday June 7, 1792, as a result of the accusations levelled against him in Parliament, John Kimber of Bristol was tried for murder at the Old Bailey. The trial took far less time in court than a murder case would do now, but still provoked a great deal of public interest. According to *The London Chronicle*, 'this trial lasted from noon to six o' clock. The curiosity to hear it was such, as to fill the court in a few minutes after the doors were open'.⁷⁸ The prosecution called a number of witnesses, of whom the most important was the ship's doctor, Thomas Dowling. At the end of the day Captain Kimber was found not guilty and Dowling and another witness were charged with perjury.⁷⁹ Wilberforce's first biographers, his sons, noted in 1836 that Kimber escaped 'in the judgement of Mr. Wilberforce, "through the shameful remissness of the Crown lawyers, and the indecent behaviour of a high personage who from the bench identified himself with the prisoner's cause."' ⁸⁰ The 'high personage' was the Duke of Clarence who had experience as a naval commander, was in favour of retaining the slave trade, and was considered to be the Royal Navy's representative within the royal family. The Wilberforce children's' reluctance to name him is understandable. At the time they were writing he was, as William IV, the king.

It seems likely that a more rigorous trial would have seen the jury convicting Captain Kimber, but his guilt or innocence notwithstanding, the story is a powerful one. Not only does it depict murder, but also an outrage upon the virtue and modesty of a young woman, anxious to conceal the fact, it would appear, that she is menstruating, the 'situation incident to her sex'. Modesty in the late eighteenth century was very rigidly defined and any evidence of sexual activity in a woman would tend to diminish—in eighteenth-century eyes—claims about modesty. Cruikshank clearly interprets Wilberforce's word 'modesty' as 'virgin modesty'. In the newspaper accounts of the trial of John Kimber most newspapers drop comments about the young woman's modesty and instead report that she was

⁷⁸ *The London Chronicle*, Friday June 8, 1792.

⁷⁹ *The Trial of Captain John Kimber, for the Supposed Murder of an African Girl, at the Admiralty Sessions, before the Hon. Sir James Marriot KNT. (Judge Advocate) and Sir William Ashurst, KNT. &c. on Thursday June 7, 1792. Of which he was most honorably acquitted, and the two evidences for the prosecution committed to Newgate to take their trials for wilful and corrupt perjury* (London: William Lane, 1792), p. 15.

⁸⁰ R.I & S. Wilberforce, *Life*, I, p. 357.

suffering from ‘a certain complaint’. *The Morning Herald* alone reports that she was suffering from a ‘gonorrhoea and lethurgy’. Moreover, the trial papers show that Thomas Dowling testified in court that it was he who had communicated the story to Wilberforce in the first place, actually the night before Wilberforce made his speech, and second that the girl was, in his words, ‘affected with a gonorrhoea, or clap’. We do not learn how she contracted the disease—she may well have been a victim of rape just as she was most certainly a victim of abduction. In either case, she was eventually a victim of murder. But in the late eighteenth century, since any evidence of sexual activity—even as a victim of rape—would tend to undermine declarations in Parliament about the girl’s ‘modesty’, it is tempting to speculate on whether or not Wilberforce knew her medical diagnosis before making his speech in Parliament. Certainly either Dowling or Wilberforce was concealing the truth. We may now wonder what the fuss was about, after all, the woman was clearly a victim of many crimes, but in 1792 details such as this compromised the credibility of Wilberforce’s evidence to Parliament—and ultimately contributed to the conviction for perjury of Thomas Dowling.

However, in the story which appeared before Parliament, the attack, first on a woman’s modesty and second on her life, contains all the ingredients necessary for a sentimental parable, but in Cobbett’s account it falls short of being fully sentimental rhetoric. It moves away from the language of sentiment popular until the late 1780s and towards the language of the Gothic, which was the new literary sensation of the 1790s. The language is uncompromising but, unlike the reports of the 1789 speech, tends to invite horror rather than tears. Few changes were required, however, to ensure that the story became a sentimental one in the popular press and these changes were made—or Wilberforce’s actual words were represented—by *The Star*. In their account of the event:

The innocent simplicity and modesty of this poor creature, reflecting upon the inhuman indecency with which she had been exposed, affected her so much, that she fell into convulsions, and in three days she died.⁸¹

⁸¹ *Star*, 1227, Tuesday 3 April 1792.

In this version the partly legalistic and partly medical register of the Cobbett account is replaced by more emotionally suggestive language. Where the first extract has 'young girl', *The Star* has 'poor creature'. More importantly, where the first extract gives physical reasons for the woman's death, telling us that Kimber 'tied her up by one leg, after which she lost all sensation, and in the course of three days she expired', *The Star* ascribes her death to her emotional state as a result of her treatment. In this version the convulsions which kill her are as a result of her affective response to 'the inhuman indecency with which she had been exposed'. According to *The Star* it was not the beating which killed her but rather her shame at having the 'situation incident to her sex' (or the exposure incident to her punishment) made general knowledge. This is a sentimental version of the story, a version in which the inner emotional state is shown to have a greater effect on the body than the external beatings it receives. In addition, *The Star's* version seems particularly calculated to rouse the indignation of its female readers who are implicitly invited to imaginatively place themselves in the situation of the murdered slave girl. It is this sympathetic identification which makes *The Star's* account, unlike that in *The Parliamentary History*, a sentimental one. Moreover, in this version we have a tale which is both sentimental and Gothic but which urges us to respond with sensibility ourselves. Wilberforce clearly saw the value of outraging public feeling with stories such as this. Indeed, according to one account he saw these occurrences as providential;

The recent enormities appeared to have been permitted by Heaven for the purpose of rendering it impossible that any one should have the presumption to justify the continuation of a traffic that was necessarily productive of crimes that admitted of no excuse or palliation whatever.⁸²

Public feeling was outraged and, on this occasion, so was the feeling of the House. But not quite enough. Henry Dundas suggested an amendment to the Abolition Bill: the introduction of the word 'gradual'. The bill passed as amended, by 230

⁸² *Parliamentary Register*, 32, p. 174.

votes to 85, and gradual abolition became law, the final date for slave trading to remain legal being later fixed at 1796. But this gave the West India Interest room to manoeuvre. Once again parliamentary delaying tactics came into play, further evidence was demanded, and it became clear that gradual abolition was to mean no abolition.

Conclusion

Revolution to Abolition and Beyond

The first efforts of William Wilberforce and others to abolish the slave trade were unsuccessful. The Abolition Committee had set out in 1787 to see the trade abolished at the earliest possible opportunity. By 1792 that opportunity looked as if it might be a long time in coming. Much had taken place in the intervening time to focus the minds of British politicians and the British public on other issues. To start with, on the morning of 20 July 1789 two events profoundly changed the course of the anti-slavery movement. The first was the death of one of the campaign's earliest agitators, James Ramsay. The second was a report in the newspapers of 'rebellion and civil war in France', a rebellion which, England learned for the first time, had led to the storming of the Bastille.¹ The French Revolution rapidly became the defining event of the 1790s, over-shadowing the abolition movement and bringing out the conservative instincts of many who had previously clamoured for change. After the outbreak of war with France in 1793, and the introduction of repressive measures such as the suspension of Habeus Corpus in 1794, few of the middle or upper ranks of society had any inclination to rock the boat. While the slavery debate continued into the 1790s and beyond, by the middle of the decade abolition of slavery had become associated in the public mind with radicals and English Jacobins. This was an association which was vigorously promoted by opponents of abolition. One anonymous pamphleteer announced that his aim was:

To relinquish then at once the JACOBINS of ENGLAND, the *Wilberforces*, the *Coopers*, the *Paines*, and the *Clarksons*, the dupes who are flattered into mischief, and those of a far different description, who direct their motions. [...] It may be asked, By what motives the promoters of the Abolition have been actuated? the answer is plain, Fanaticism and False Philosophy had exalted their imagination, and obscured their reason; and in what they affected

¹ *Times*, 20 July 1789.

to call a Reform in the Constitution, they saw the means of establishing such a Government as best suited their wild ephemeral theory.²

Both Wilberforce and Thomas Paine, one imagines, would have been rather surprised to have found themselves placed in such proximity. Wilberforce was no radical. He was always a thoroughgoing conservative in most social and political matters and remained a friend and staunch ally of William Pitt—who to suppress radicalism introduced some of the most repressive legislation in English history. However, the pamphleteer's rather wild assertions about Wilberforce illustrate how far the tone of the abolition debate was altered by events in France. Instead of the abolitionists threatening British commercial and imperial interests, the standard argument of the West-India interest in the 1780s, abolition now takes on a more sinister aspect in the eyes of the pro-slavery camp. Wilberforce can be accused of attempting to tamper with the constitution or even of plotting to overthrow it entirely and by association abolition can be dubbed a treasonable activity. The strategy appears to have worked. After 1792 interest in abolition declined, as did the appearance of slavery-related publications.

The French Revolution was not the only civil commotion to alter the course of the anti-slavery movement. Slave rebellions were not uncommon in Britain's colonies nor in the colonies of other European powers and a number of risings had taken place throughout the eighteenth century. A few, like Tacky's Revolt in Jamaica in 1760, were serious affairs which threatened to undermine the ability of the British to maintain a colony on the island. Most were more localised and were put down with comparative ease (though with no less brutality) by the colonial authorities. The regularity and inevitability of these uprisings is indicated by a toast made by Samuel Johnson 'when in company with some very grave men at Oxford'. According to a disapproving James Boswell (who wrote a poem in favour of slavery) Johnson raised his glass 'to the next insurrection of the negroes in the

² *A Very New Pamphlet Indeed! Being the Truth: Addressed to the People at Large. Containing some Strictures on the English Jacobins, and the Evidence of Lord M'Cartney, and Others, Before the House of Lords, Respecting the Slave Trade* (London: n.p., 1792), pp. 3-4. Thomas Cooper (1759-1839) was a lawyer who went as a democratic envoy to Paris in 1792 for which he was attacked by Burke and others (DNB).

West-Indies'.³ Johnson, a lifelong opponent of slavery, clearly recognised that slave uprisings were both a form of protest against slavery and a method of self-emancipation. Hundreds of slaves, known as maroons, had freed themselves as an act of resistance and were living beyond British control in the highlands and inaccessible regions of many Caribbean islands, especially Jamaica. Thousands more wished to join them. The planters lived in constant fear of uprisings which came with some regularity.

The early 1790s was marked by two such uprisings of importance to the British. The first was a major, if abortive, rebellion which took place on the Windward Island of Dominica in January 1791. The island alternated periods of French and British rule during the eighteenth century and an Anglo-French Creole population managed to peacefully co-exist, even through a period of French rule between 1778 and 1783. News of the revolution in France changed opinions on the island and in 1791 French supporters of the revolution in tandem, if not in concert, with a substantial Maroon population raised a rebellion against the British plantation owners. The attempt failed and the leaders of the revolt were hanged, drawn and quartered, a punishment not seen in Britain since the early seventeenth century. Peace was restored but news of the rebellion reached Britain in March 1791 and considerably embarrassed Wilberforce and other abolitionists, who were trying to prove that Africans were peaceable people.⁴

More serious, and more far-reaching in its implications, was the revolution which took place on the island of Hispaniola during the 1790s. Here the French colony of San Domingo came under the influence of French Revolutionary thinking. The mixed-race population, then referred to as mulattos, demanded the equal treatment which appeared to be promised them in the new French constitution. Denied this equality, the mulattos raised a rebellion in autumn 1790 under the leadership of Ogé and Chavannes, who were both executed when the rebellion failed. The attempt,

³ *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (1791), ed. George Birkbeck Hill, revised L.F. Powell, 6 vols, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), III, p. 200. Boswell's poem was *No Abolition of Slavery: or, the Universal Empire of Love* (London: n.p., 1791).

⁴ Lennox Honychurch, *The Dominica Story: A History of the Island*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1995). See especially pp. 49-103.

and the continuing influx of revolutionary sentiment from France, sowed the seed for a more serious uprising. In August 1791 the slaves in the central and northern part of the colony rose up and 'armed with pruning hooks, machetes, and torches, surrounded the houses, slaughtered the men, drank the rum, raped the women, and fired the estates and canefields.'⁵ A few months later, the western part of the colony joined the rebellion, plunging the colony into a twelve year period of revolution which culminated in the establishment of the Republic of Haiti in 1803.

The San Domingo revolution was marked by appalling violence from all sections of the population, reports of which were quick to reach British newspapers. When they appeared official French publications were seized upon, translated, and sold in large numbers. Many people learned about the revolution from translations of speeches made at the French National Assembly, speeches which, though dealing with pain and suffering, are far from sentimental. Almost half of one such speech consists of detailed accounts of the horrific deaths met by many of the French victims of the rebellious slaves. We hear of 'M. *Robert*, a carpenter' who was 'seized by the negroes, who bind him between two planks, and saw him deliberately in two'.⁶ Another story recounts how;

A colonist, father of two young ladies, whites, is bound down by a savage, ring-leader of a band, who ravishes the eldest in his presence, delivers the younger over to one of his satellites; their passion satisfied, they slaughter both the father and the daughters.⁷

⁵ Robert Debs Heinl and Nancy Gordon Heinl, *Written in Blood: The Story of the Haitian People 1492-1995*, rev. edn (New York: University Press of America, 1996), p. 43. The classic account of the Haiti revolution remains; C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938), 3rd edn (London: Allison & Busby, 1980). See also Thomas Ott, *The Haitian Revolution, 1789-1804* (Knoxville, TN, University of Tennessee Press, 1973).

⁶ *A Particular Account of the Commencement and Progress of the Insurrection of the Negroes in St. Domingo, which began in August, 1791; being a Translation of the Speech made to the National Assembly, the 3rd November, 1791, by the Deputies from the General Assembly on the French part of St. Domingo* (London: T. Boosey, 1792), p. 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

The stories conclude with a description of a desolated colony: ‘mean time the flames gained ground on all sides. *La Petite Anse, la plaine du Nord*, the district of *Morin, Limonade*, presented only heaps of ashes and dead bodies’. The narrator is then quick to turn upon the French abolitionists, crying ‘what a lesson for *The Amis des Noirs!*’⁸

Accounts such as these played havoc with British abolitionists’ attempts to portray the slaves as harmless, downtrodden victims. In the public imagination the slaves themselves now became the aggressors and slavery, with its concomitant brutal discipline, became once more a necessary evil in the minds of many who had previously opposed it. The nature of the rhetoric changed too. Rather than seeing the tears of the slaves we hear the screams of their victims. Anti-slavery rhetoric latched on to this shift in public sensibilities as well and, as we saw in Chapter Five, abolitionists were also able to make use of a form of rhetoric allied to the Gothic novel, then rising in popularity. But for those who wished to indulge their sensibilities there were still plenty of victims to sympathise with—including a large number of Europeans—the same people who had been castigated a few months earlier for being cruel, heartless, and greedy. This new reality allowed sentimentally inclined pro-slavery campaigners to tip the balance of sympathy away from the slaves, who could be shown to be barbaric, and towards the planters. The old arguments about Africans being unfit for freedom resurfaced with new vigour and it was suggested that true humanity lay in the suppression of ‘Negroe barbarity’. Furthermore, the compassion of sentimentally inclined abolitionists for the slaves could be ‘exposed’ as a cynical and politically motivated pretence. In a pamphlet of 1792 Henry Redhead made this point with some clarity:

If the outrages committed in the fertile and unhappy colony of St. Domingo; if rage, insolence, ingratitude, barbarity on the one side; meekness, suffering, sorrow, innocence, on the other, can excite no indignation in the breasts of the abolitionists; if no compassion arise from a complication of forfeits and persecutions, then they have no humanity; and their demands must cloak some

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

evil and latent passion, which will have something more than the mere abolition of the slave trade.⁹

Again, abolitionists are accused of revolutionary tendencies and anti-slavery is conflated with radicalism. It is interesting to note, however, that in this passage the author creates an opposition in which the slaves, characterised by 'rage, insolence, ingratitude, [and] barbarity' are placed against the planters who display 'meekness, suffering, sorrow, [and] innocence'. On a literary level, we could argue that the slaves' alleged characteristics are the concern of the Gothic novel while the planters are shown as concerned with the interests of the sentimental novel. Moreover, the slaves are characterised as having male vices, while the planters are noteworthy for their female virtues, particularly those virtues inculcated in numerous sentimental novels and conduct books. In short, the planters are identified as sentimental heroes and it becomes the duty of the benevolent to sympathise with, relieve, and where possible to emulate them. The abolitionists, according to Redhead's argument, are guilty of displaying false sensibility and of harbouring 'some evil and latent passion'. This is a variety of 'Gothic sensibility' which would not have gone amiss in one of Ann Radcliffe's novels. The abolitionists here are rather like the plausible and outwardly benevolent Marquis de Montalt in *The Romance of the Forest*, published in the previous year.¹⁰ Just as his generosity towards the impoverished La Motte family serves only as a means towards satisfying his lust for the beautiful Adeline, so the abolitionists, it is argued, have their own 'evil and latent passion'. In this case the ulterior motive is presumably revolution and regicide.

Revolution and rebellion abroad distracted attention away from the abolitionists and provided reasons to revert to a pro-slavery line for many whose opposition to slavery was never very strong. Clarkson dropped out of the movement entirely while Wilberforce became a national laughing-stock. 'We understand, from very

⁹ Henry Redhead, *A Letter to Bache Heathcote, Esq. on the Fatal Consequences of Abolishing the Slave Trade, both to England, and her American Colonies* (London: John Stockdale, 1792), p. 77.

¹⁰ Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), ed. Chloe Chard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

authentic information', joked *The Star* in 1792, 'that a large body of *free Negroes*, from St. Domingo, are daily expected at *Hull*, in order to offer themselves to the protection and service of MR. WILBERFORCE.'¹¹ A satirical print by James Gillray went even further, showing Wilberforce seated on a sofa in a luxurious apartment, sharing a pipe with a bare-breasted African woman while the Bishop of Rochester is locked in an intimate embrace with another African woman. Above Wilberforce is a painting of Inkle and Yarico (the hypocritical Inkle sold his Native American lover into slavery¹²) while a book lying on the floor and painting over the doorway allude to the 'innocence' of Captain Kimber. [Figure 9] Both ridiculing Wilberforce, and questioning the purity of his motivations, these were typical of the many satirical productions to appear at the end of the first phase of popular anti-slavery.

In January 1793 the King of France was executed. Within a few days Britain and France were at war. Under the circumstances a revolutionary measure such as abolition of the slave trade could not be considered by a government fighting what was a counter-revolutionary war. Not for another twelve years, until after Britain had secured victory over the French and Spanish fleets at Trafalgar in 1805, would anyone in a position of authority seriously consider changing any aspect of the regulation of the sea service or the colonies. But once British sea-supremacy had been achieved, the battle to outlaw the slave trade was back on and was won within two years. The second wave of anti-slavery agitation, post-Trafalgar, was markedly different from the first wave. As well as abolition being seen as a necessary development of the humanitarian impulse it was also seen as an international duty, in which a newly empowered Britain could impose its will on other nations. Abolition and, later, emancipation became part of a mythology of empire, according to which Britain ruled the world because she was morally best equipped to do so. Whether any other than the most blindly idealistic really believed this is a moot point. Few people, in the nineteenth as much as the eighteenth century, had ever been in much doubt about the real commercial nature

¹¹ *Star*, Monday 2 April, 1792.

¹² *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 1, pp. 47-51.



Figure 9

James Gillray, *Philanthropic Consolations After the Loss of the Slave-Bill*. 4 April 1796

of British involvement overseas. Commerce, however, is a poor subject for a national mythology and so British anti-slavery, conducted in the face of foreign inhumanity, provided a convenient rallying cry for the advocates of an expanding empire.

The popular language of anti-slavery rhetoric, post-Trafalgar, changed too, a point illustrated by a moving and historically significant event in the chamber of the House of Commons. On 23 February 1807, almost fifteen years after Dundas had effectively wrecked abolition with his gradualist amendment, Parliament voted overwhelmingly in favour of abolition of the slave trade. During the debate the then Solicitor-General, Sir Samuel Romilly, spoke against the trade. His speech concluded with a long and emotional tribute to Wilberforce in which he contrasted the peaceful happiness of Wilberforce in his bed with the tortured sleeplessness of the guilty Bonaparte. In the words of Romilly's biographer;

Wilberforce was overcome by the power of Romilly's concluding passages, and sat with his head on his hands, tears streaming down his face. As Romilly reached his final sentences the House broke into one of those scenes that it reserves for great occasions. Members stood and cheered him tumultuously.¹³

According to the *Morning Chronicle* he received 'three distinct and universal cheers'.¹⁴ Scenes such as this are rare in the House of Commons, where applause is forbidden, but this report, or one like it, must have reached William Hey, the Yorkshire surgeon, evangelical, and former Mayor of Leeds, for on February 28 he wrote to Wilberforce to ask if it was true. 'If so,' he continues, 'was not this an unprecedented effusion of approbation?' Wilberforce replied that 'I was myself so completely overpowered by my feelings [...] that I was insensible to all that was passing around me'.¹⁵ In this exchange, and in his response to the cheers he received in Parliament, Wilberforce's emotion is understandable. He had, after all,

¹³ Patrick Medd, *Romilly: A Life of Sir Samuel Romilly, Lawyer and Reformer* London: Collins, 1968, p. 165.

¹⁴ *Morning Chronicle*, 11, 786, 24 February 1807.

¹⁵ Robert Isaac and Samuel Wilberforce, *Life of William Wilberforce*, 5 vols (London: John Murray, 1838), III, p. 297.

achieved the goal towards which he had been working for almost twenty years. The event is one which is clearly susceptible to being portrayed in a sentimental manner and yet it is recorded neither in the newspaper accounts of the debate nor in Cobbett's *Parliamentary Debates*, the only parliamentary periodical surviving by 1807. There may be a number of reasons for this, not least that all of the newspapers gave over much of their space to reporting a mass panic which had gripped a crowd during a public execution in London. In the ensuing stampede thirty people were trampled to death and many others injured. This news may have been of lesser historical significance than the abolition of the slave trade, but clearly it impinged more nearly on the lives of most Londoners. To accommodate full reports of the tragedy, accounts of parliamentary debates were kept to a minimum.

This story might not have pushed Wilberforce's tears out of the papers twenty years previously, but by 1807 tears, even the tears of famous parliamentarians, were not quite so fashionable. Pathos, sentiment, and other moving emotions remained available to writers, but by now they appeared to be for the most part confined to the pens of minor poets and novelists. The period at which everyone boasted of their sensibility was over, seeming to have died with the outbreak of hostilities with France. Newspapers projected the image that they had more important things to write about than a weeping middle-aged politician, while politicians themselves adopted a harder edge, suitable to the leaders of a country which had been more than a decade at war. As Markman Ellis has pointed out, recent critical approaches have tended to agree both that the 1790s saw the demise of sentimentalism and that this demise occurred broadly as a result of the new political climate resulting from the revolution in France. However, Ellis argues that 'this consensus may be unjustified' as 'debate was always central to the hybrid power of sentimentalism'.¹⁶ The criticism which sentimental writings faced in the 1790s and after may well have altered the terms of the debate, but did not mean that sentimentalism was an entirely spent force. Rather, he concludes, moments of criticism tended to 'testify to the continued force of sentimentalism, providing the channel for its

¹⁶ Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 190-91.

transmutation (survival and renaissance) into powerful forms of political argument and literary production in the nineteenth century and beyond.’¹⁷

Wilberforce’s tears may have gone unnoticed in the press, but sentimental arguments and the rhetoric of sensibility maintained (and maintain) their power to persuade both in the anti-slavery debate and in the wider political world. Sentimental heroes, parables and arguments continued to make appearances in nineteenth-century anti-slavery literature, though less frequently in political tracts and pamphlets. Instead they made their home in publications such as *The Anti-Slavery Album* which in 1828 reprinted many of the poems of the 1780s and 1790s alongside a number of more recent contributions.¹⁸ In the same year an *Appeal to the Hearts and Consciences of British Women* appeared in which a number of sentimental arguments are progressed. Women, it is argued, should be particularly involved in the emancipation campaign because ‘the peculiar texture of her mind, her strong feelings and quick sensibilities, especially qualify her, not only to sympathise with suffering, but also to plead for the oppressed’.¹⁹ The consequences of women not doing so, the pamphlet appears to argue, is that these feminine sensibilities come under threat. The story of Donna Sophia is told, in which a slave-trader’s wife moves from a position of complete abhorrence to a position of voyeuristic enjoyment of the brutality of slavery. ‘When we first settled here she was continually interceding for the slaves’, relates Señor d’Almeydra, her husband. ‘She constantly wept while I punished them, and now she is among them from morning till night, and stands by and sees them punished!!’ This sentimental parable illustrates the danger of allowing one’s sensibilities to become hardened to cruelty, and articulates an anxiety over losing one’s femininity as well as making a clear abolitionist statement.

Sentimental rhetoric never completely disappeared from the discourse of anti-slavery. Indeed, sentimental strategies are still widely used by humanitarian

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

¹⁸ *The Anti-Slavery Album: Selections in Verse from Cowper, Hannah More, Montgomery, Pringle, and Others* (London: Howlett and Brimmer, 1828).

¹⁹ *Appeal to the Hearts and Consciences of British Women* (Leicester: A. Cockshaw, 1828), p. 3.

agencies hoping to raise awareness of present day slavery, poverty, and famine. Slavery, in fact if not in name, is still a tragic reality for many people around the world. Newspapers and magazines now frequently carry advertisements which use very similar sentimental rhetoric to that developed by the abolitionists of the eighteenth century. In the twentieth century their effectiveness is usually enhanced by the inclusion of moving and often harrowing imagery. The late eighteenth century, however, saw the relationship between sensibility and the discourse of anti-slavery at its height. Indeed, one can think of few other occasions in history in which a literary genre was so closely allied with a popular political movement. Hundreds of sentimental poets, playwrights, and novelists embraced the cause, but of no less importance were the dozens of political writers, on either side of the argument, who felt compelled to make at least part of their case in the language of sensibility. Although drawing on developments in sentimental rhetoric which had been long in the making, these polemicists were the first to engage in an extensive public debate which saw the widespread use of sentimental persuasive techniques. With the temporary demise of the abolition movement in the mid-1790s these techniques were retained for the uses to which they had originally been put as well as being adapted to new polemical purposes. But never again would sentimental argument be so closely identified with a single political movement. Indeed, never again would sensibility be thought of as the obvious site in which to conduct a political campaign. From being the political wing of the dominant literary discourse of the late eighteenth century, the rhetoric of sensibility, though never quite losing its appeal, would be relegated to the status of just one in an increasingly large arsenal of nineteenth-century political rhetorics.

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