

Michael Scrivener

Wayne State University

Aa1973@wayne.edu

John Thelwall and Slavery

Introduction

The issue of slavery became a nationally celebrated cause in the 1780s precisely when John Thelwall was acquiring a mature political identity. He participated in debates on slavery at Coachmaker's Hall. In his own words, "The discussions on the subject of the Slave Trade, into which he entered with an almost diseased enthusiasm, led the way to very considerable changes in his political sentiments" (xxiv), as he rejected his earlier Toryism for radical reform and slavery abolition. Slavery is a topic in much of his published writing, including a sympathetic account of the Saint Domingue slave rebellion as well as an important abolitionist poem. While from the historical distance of several centuries it may not seem remarkable that a slavery abolitionist was also a radical democrat and political reformer, in Thelwall's day it was far more typical for the abolitionist to be someone like the Evangelical William Wilberforce, who vehemently opposed democratic reforms, and for the democratic radical to be someone like William Cobbett, who expressed racist views about Jews and blacks. According to the literary critic Marcus Wood, Thelwall, unlike most of his fellow radicals, "was not a political pragmatist over questions of race and Empire, but remained a profound idealist" (239).

I will focus on three of his abolitionist writings, the 1787 dramatic farce *Incle and Yarico*, his treatment of the slave rebellion in the 1801 novel, *The Daughter of Adoption*, and finally the frequently reprinted abolitionist poem, "The Negro's Prayer," first

published in the *Monthly Magazine* in 1807 to celebrate the passage of the slave trade abolition bill.

Incle and Yarico

An operatic farce, *Incle and Yarico* comically treats the well-known eighteenth-century story of Inkle and Yarico, in which an English merchant betrays and sells into slavery his Amerindian lover, Yarico, who is usually represented as a “Noble Savage.”¹ The play translates the intertextual narrative into a forthrightly abolitionist satire in its depiction of the slave trade and wittily represents English middle-class status anxieties and its crude materialism, deploying urban middle-class speech and malapropisms. By making the Amerindian characters speak a black African stage dialect, the play blurs the differences between African and Amerindian slaves to highlight the common victimization of the non-Europeans. One should bear in mind the overall context in which Thelwall’s play was written: the Tupac Amaru revolt in the Andes of the 1780s, the highly lucrative transatlantic slave trade, the earliest stages of the abolitionist movement in England, slave rebellions in the West Indies, and the early stirrings of the London reform movement.

The 1787 farce, designed as a two-act afterpiece for the London theatre, revises provocatively the eighteenth-century fable about Englishmen and slavery, initially popularized by Richard Steele’s narrative appearing in *The Spectator*, no. 11 (13 March 1711). The popularity of the Inkle and Yarico story at the very same time that West Indian slavery and the transatlantic slave trade flourished indicates the ambivalence of British culture about slavery and national empire. Thelwall’s play attacks this

ambivalence, exposing its moral equivocations, and forcefully, if comically, subverts the complacent myths of public opinion.

In Thelwall's satirical revision of the traditional story, his Incle and Yarico have been together for two years, long enough for Incle to become restless and homesick. A Thelwall invention is the improbable happenstance of Incle's parents and uncle, on a slave-trading expedition from London, becoming stranded in the same area of Central America as Incle himself. Discovering his parents and uncle in the first scene of the second act, Incle is torn between his sense of obligation to Yarico, who saved his life, and his desire for social advancement that would be gratified by selling into slavery both his lover and her friend, Yahamona. Among the sailors who were on the English ship is a character named Williams, who sides with the Amerindians against the English and who pairs up with Yahamona. The Amerindians, who intervene before the British enslave Yarico and Yahamona, establish the terms by which the farce is finally resolved: at first they plan to enslave the British as agricultural laborers, but after Yarico's discussion with her father, the native leader, the British are permitted to live among them but not allowed to return to their country to "do you wicked designs some oder time" (Felsenstein 70). By the play's end a penitent Incle is back together with a disappointed Yarico.

A principal technique in Thelwall's farce is reversal, comically illustrated in act one, scene one, where the servant Timothy finds himself coyly fending off the attentions of an Indian woman who desires him; because her friend Yarico has a white lover, she too wants one. Faced with the frankly sexual Yahamona, Timothy adopts the role of shy maiden (Felsenstein 52). According to Frank Felsenstein, Yahamona's "predatory"

sexuality comically inverts the conventional designation of the desirable woman as the “trophy” to be won (Felsenstein 34). Thelwall reverses the cultural stereotypes. The civilized English are crudely materialistic, even animalistic, for Inle’s uncle is named “Turtle,” thereby mocking the character’s appetite for turtle meat, and the name of Inle’s father, “Traffic,” evokes the phrase “traffic in human beings,” referring to the slave trade. In contrast, the natives are altruistic, self-sacrificing, noble, idealistic and generous. Countering the mercenary Inle is the plain-speaking democrat Williams who articulates the play’s explicitly political ideas. The most dramatic reversal is Williams’s decision to side with the natives against the English. When the supposedly cannibalistic American natives can dispose of the morally compromised English in any manner they choose, they practice the “forgiveness” associated with Christian morality and end up granting them freedom—but not freedom to continue slave trading (Felsenstein 67). By having the native characters speak the black African stage dialect, Thelwall blurs the distinction between African and American slaves, not unlike some visual representations of Yarico with African features (Felsenstein 15). Thelwall deconstructs the racial binary in the play, white and colored, through numerous reversals. The sexuality of Yarico and Yahamona derives from the Enlightenment’s assumption of a free, natural sexuality enjoyed by those uncontaminated by sexually repressive Christianity and especially the commercial corruption of sexuality. Thelwall deploys the Amerindians’ sexuality satirically against what he sees as the hypocritically puritanical middle class, something he does as well in his later novel about the slave rebellion in Saint Domingue, *The Daughter of Adoption* (1801).

There are two contrasting visions of Englishness, one of which is the ruthless pursuit of self-interest—an economic liberty to compete for wealth and power without the distractions of compassion and morality. When Uncle Turtle tries to persuade the reluctant Inle to put his lover on the slave market, he tells his nephew not to worry about his conscience, “Conscience! Ha! Ha! Tom. I’ll tell you this, my boy: if your conscience is not as elastic as an alderman’s stomach (take my word for ‘t), you’ll never add another plum to the one your father has accumulated” (Felsenstein 63). Another version of Englishness, embodied in the character of Williams, rejects slavery because of the Golden Rule: “Split my mainmast if I don’t think it bloody cruel not to do as we would wish to be done by.” Moreover, he conceives of national liberty reflexively: “What then did we only fight for own freedom that we might rob others of theirs?” (Felsenstein 60). Anticipating William Blake’s analysis of sexuality in his poems “London” and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Thelwall shows that slavery is a logical expression of an egoistic commercial culture fueled by a commodified sexuality. When Inle’s father and uncle urge him to sell his lover and her friend into slavery, they dismiss as unreal the authority of moral claims such as “gratitude” and “conscience” and legalistically dismiss any obligations he might have to his child by Yarico. Such moral concepts are fine for “poets” and impoverished writers who live in garrets but not applicable to those who want the pleasures that money can buy in a commercial society (Felsenstein 64).

The Daughter of Adoption

Thelwall’s novel, *The Daughter of Adoption*, was published under a pseudonym in 1801 by the radical publisher Richard Phillips in London, and another edition was

produced the same year in Dublin by the commercial publisher Nicholas Kelly. The pseudonym he chose for the novel, “John Beaufort,” alludes slyly to the location in London where he used to deliver his lectures, the Beaufort Buildings. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* also alludes to Thelwall’s lecture site in the name of Caroline Beaufort, Victor Frankenstein’s mother. Godwin, Mary’s father, knew Thelwall well. The motive for the *nom de plume* might have been the political repression that forced William Godwin also to assume various pseudonyms for his publications in the early nineteenth century. By 1800 the London Corresponding Society and labor unions had been completely outlawed, the rebellion in Ireland of 1798 had been savagely put down, and radical pamphlets and periodicals, which had flourished earlier in the 1790s, had been silenced. In this hostile literary environment Thelwall constructs his novel, about a third of which takes place in the West Indies. The novel brings together two young people who eventually get married after numerous adventures and mishaps. Henry Montfort undergoes a long moral education in the novel struggling between the conflicting influences of his aristocratic father, who becomes a West Indian planter, and his Creole lover, who is a Wollstonecraftian feminist.

Although Thelwall never visited the West Indies, as a young man he met West Indians in London where he came to dislike the “Creolean character” with its “effeminate, or rather childish vivacity, that unfeeling and tyrannical vehemence, and that sort of hoggish voluptuousness” (*Poems* xx–xxi). Just as British slavery was central to Thelwall’s politics, so the Sugar Islands were anything but marginal in the 1790s for the British economy and the military struggle against revolutionary France. While Britain sought to retain control of its own sugar islands (especially Jamaica), suppress slave

rebellions, and steal colonies from the French where it could (especially Martinique and Saint Domingue), these efforts were costly in treasure and manpower. Between 1793 and 1798, when Britain withdrew, military action in Saint Domingue alone entailed over £4,000,000 and over 80,000 soldiers' deaths (James 200). Yet if the British—and French—experienced heavy losses, they hardly matched the fatalities of the Saint Domingue blacks, who in the ten years between 1791 and 1801 saw a third of their people die in the revolution (James 242). C. L. R. James's classic history, *The Black Jacobins*, emphasizes not just the hideous level of violence but the political significance of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) for modernity and transatlantic political history as the first successful slave rebellion against the European powers—an anti-colonial, anti-imperialistic insurrection. That Thelwall makes Saint Domingue central in his novel suggests that he understood the world-historical significance of the Haitian Revolution when other writers did not.

The novel's represented slave rebellion has only a few comparable parallels in romantic-era literature: John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796), William Earle's *Obi; or, The History of Three-Fingered Jack* (1800), and Leonora Sansay's *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo* (1808) are the most obvious. Stedman's account of the military campaign against the maroons of Surinam in the 1770s only seems to have reinforced the sexual stereotypes of enslaved women—stereotypes available from many sources at the time. Earle's *Obi*, on the other hand, by representing sympathetically a rebellious slave in Jamaica, illustrated that British political culture was not uniformly hostile to movements of self-emancipation, even when they used violence. Although Thelwall does not

romanticize political violence and counsels against revenge, he provides an explanatory narrative for it. As he states in *The Rights of Nature* (1796): “Had the Maroons and negroes never been most wickedly enslaved, their masters had never been murdered” (409).

Sansay’s *Secret History*, which tells the Saint Domingue story in 1802–04 as General Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1758–1806) takes over from Toussaint Louverture (c. 1743–1803), reproduces uncritically the sexual stereotypes of Creoles and enslaved people and leaves the reader with haunting images of black on white violence. Indeed, compared with Sansay’s novel or any contemporary text with which it is even vaguely similar, Thelwall’s is far more analytical and reflective. Thelwall approvingly imagined the violent self-emancipation of slaves, according to Raphael Hörmann in a recent essay on the Haitian Revolution. Thelwall’s novel and other writings affirm the “right of the Afro-Caribbean slaves to destroy the colonial system of exploitation and the right of the European lower classes to overthrow their socially and politically repressive regimes” (159). In another recent essay, Peter J. Kitson takes a more critical view of Thelwall’s novel and its ideological shortcomings: By focusing on the Haitian Revolution’s most violent beginnings rather than the heroic career of Toussaint Louverture, the novel reproduces the stereotypes of black sexuality, from seductive mulattas to black rapists of white women, and, finally, the narrative is unable “to fashion an appropriate textual iconography for the suffering of the slaves” (Kitson, “John Thelwall in Saint Domingue” 126–35). Perhaps, as Arnold Markley argues, Thelwall felt he was forced to use conventions in which he did not believe in order to reach the novel-reading audience

(112), but *The Daughter of Adoption* also displays an ideological sophistication that belies cynicism.

For many details about Saint Domingue and the Haitian Revolution the novel draws upon two principal sources, the *Voyage* (1797) of Baron de Wimpffen (1748–1819) and the influential *Historical Survey* (1797) of Bryan Edwards (1743–1800), who has the most influential account in English of the actual rebellion. The novel’s reliance on stereotypical images and biased information can be traced to the fact that almost all representations of the Saint Domingue conflict were written by whites (Popkin 8). Thelwall’s moral and political analysis could not be more distant from that of his two white authors, planters from Jamaica and Saint Domingue. His novel defends the rebellion of Saint Domingue that started in 1791, but at the time of the novel’s publication in 1801, the British were worried about rebellions in Jamaica, their largest West Indian colony that had experienced an uprising of the Trelawney Maroons in 1795–96. For the British reading public in early 1801 “Saint Domingue” would signify a violent slave rebellion, the failed but costly intervention of British troops and the remarkable rise to power of Toussaint Louverture, former slave, who expelled the British in 1798, invaded Spanish Santo Domingo, and freed its slaves (1800–01). Although the heroic Toussaint was eventually captured and imprisoned by Napoleon, in whose prison he died in 1803, the trajectory of independence was inexorable. Also in 1801 there was a resurgent racism, fueled in part by the negative representations of the slave insurrections that portrayed whites as victims of black violence and hatred (Popkin 117).

Despite concentrating on the French colony, the novel does not permit the reader to forget about British colonialism, calling specific attention to British slavery when, for

example, the character of Edmunds exclaims to Henry Montfort, the novel's protagonist, after they had witnessed the French whites torturing the rebels: "O Jamaica! Jamaica! Thou island of abominations and horrors! What inconceivable cruelties are there with which those who insult our national virtue by calling themselves English planters have not polluted thee!" (*Daughter* 170). Edmunds then recalls Tacky's Revolt of 1760 and the subsequent cruel punishments of the rebels, including hanging two of them alive in chains "for nine whole days" (171). The aftermath of the most recent Maroon rebellion was notorious: the Trelawney Maroons were transported en masse to Nova Scotia, a brutal act of ethnic cleansing (Craton 125–39, 211–22).

A principal villain of the novel, Lucius Moroon, a young planter-smuggler, one of the wealthiest Creoles in Barbados, aggressively pursues Seraphina, and his name suggests "maroon"—the name for African slaves who had run away and achieved de facto emancipation. His very name would remind readers of the Trelawney Maroon Rebellion and its suppression. In terms of political symbolism for an abolitionist agenda, Moroon as a character is not well designed, assuming such an agenda would favor the maroons, but the character's villainy supports an overall hostility to the planters and the Creole enterprise to extract profits from enslaved labor. One political inference from the character Moroon is that the white Creoles mirror the negative stereotypes they have constructed of the enslaved blacks.

The novel's two main characters and principal romantic couple, Henry Montfort and Seraphina Parkinson, have their first meeting during the slave rebellion of St. Domingue, precisely when Seraphina is about to be raped by a slave. Yet, this melodramatic and iconically racist moment, which reinforces the contrast of white

morality and black savagery, is qualified and contextualized by other moments in the novel, such as the planters' sexual exploitation of enslaved women and the planters' gratuitous torturing of their captives. Planter savagery and immorality are the preconditions for the slave atrocities. Nevertheless, the *Critical Review* insists that the story of black violence is sufficient to refute the novel's abolitionist ideals. The Haitian Revolution was indeed violent and cruel, but Thelwall had no access to unbiased information, which might have inspired more resistance to the melodramatic representations of white victimhood and black cruelty. In fact, black victims far outnumbered white, as most of the 30,000 Creoles escaped to safety during the Haitian Revolution, while 100,000 blacks were killed (Popkin 140). General Dessalines's notorious slaughter of the whites who remained in Saint Domingue in 1804 violated ordinary norms of warfare and cemented the savage image of the Haitian Revolution in the eyes of Europeans for much of the nineteenth century (Popkin 137), even though an impartial historian would find the Europeans more morally culpable in this conflict. The inflammatory rape image and sexually alluring images of the mulatta also distort the context for plantation sexuality, which included active hostility to black families and routine white sexual exploitation of enslaved African women. Thelwall's novel represents the latter, to be sure, but the former goes unrecorded, perhaps because none of his white sources discussed it.

Henry Montfort, torn between his planter father and his progressive mother, is possibly modeled after London Corresponding Society martyr Joseph Gerrald (1763–96), who was the rebellious son of a wealthy West Indian planter and who received a liberal education from Samuel Parr (1747–1825) (Davis 1: xxxiii). Seraphina, modeled after

Mary Wollstonecraft, accesses the Creole symbolism in a different way, as the “nature” to Cap Français’s and London’s “culture,” perhaps following Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s Rousseauvian *Paul et Virginie* (1787), an idyllic love story set in beautiful Mauritius. Seraphina’s surname, Parkinson, resonates for Thelwall in 1800–01, because one of the Jamaican Maroon leaders in the Trelawney uprising of 1795–96 was named Leonard Parkinson, the same surname of one of Thelwall’s colleagues in the London Corresponding Society, James Parkinson (1755–1824), one of the many politically radical physicians in Thelwall’s circle of friends and acquaintances. (This is the same Parkinson who diagnosed the nerve disorder named after him.)

Saint Domingue is also the site of a key turning point in Henry Montfort’s moral education, the episode in the mountainous wilderness near the sea at the Glen of Limbé, where Henry and Edmunds, his servant-companion, connect emotionally with the sublime and beautiful scenery (*Daughter* 136–44). The encounter with the landscape triggers in Henry a philosophical reflection (141–43). This is the novel’s most well-known episode because of its parallel with the famous anecdote related by Coleridge about Thelwall visiting him and Wordsworth at Nether Stowey in 1797. After political repression eventually forced Thelwall from active politics, he tried to settle near Nether Stowey by his friend Coleridge in the West Country in 1797. Thelwall imagined himself as part of what he called a “triumvirate” with Coleridge and Wordsworth, but the settlement plans were dropped because Thelwall’s notoriety, reinforced by government spies, was too toxic for the neighborhood. According to Coleridge’s memory of their conversation several decades later, he reported that “We were once sitting in a beautiful recess in the Quantocks, when I said to him—‘Citizen John! This a fine place to talk

treason in!’—‘Nay! Citizen Samuel,’ replied he, ‘it is a place to make a man forget that there is any necessity for treason!’” (Coleridge 122).² Thelwall’s own version depicted in *The Daughter of Adoption* has almost the exact same wording by two of his main characters, who are situated in a beautiful spot in Saint Domingue, which is about to experience a slave rebellion (*Daughter* 142). Edmunds’s response to the landscape—“What a scene, and what an hour, sir, . . . to make one forget that treason was ever necessary in the world”—appears almost word for word in Coleridge’s report of Thelwall’s reaction to the beautiful landscape in Somersetshire. Henry continues his reflection on the Spanish mines thus:

Could time tread back its steps again, Edmunds, and could you and I become Indians, possessing the souls and faculties we do, and did we meet, by design or accident; on this spot, I suspect that our minds would be occupied by other ideas than those of the picturesque and the romantic—that these rocks, these pendant forests—this deep solitude, with the foaming eddies beneath, and all those splendid luminaries above, might only embolden us, by a sense of security, to question the authority of our oppressors, and to demonstrate that against the ravages of foreign usurpation, at least, it is at all times lawful both to conspire and to act.

(142)

Here is an example of the cosmopolitan imagination at work, thinking outside of one’s own situation and projecting oneself into the historical past to take a position wholly unlike one’s own ordinary role. The experience of the picturesque and romantic describe not just aesthetically pleasurable impressions of the landscape, but also constitute a moral

foundation from which to contest the authority and legitimacy of the enslaving, exploiting, and invading imperialists. As they continue their discussion Henry becomes ever more “enthusiastic,” to employ the term that would have been used then to describe an emotionally compelling experience that destroyed older structures of feeling and allowed new ones to emerge.³ Vowing to be no longer “a slave to the opinions of society” and instead to follow the “more sacred order of nature,” Henry declares that Edmunds is no longer his servant but just his friend, an equal (143), thus evoking the renunciation of aristocratic privilege during the French Revolution when people omitted titles and addressed one another as “*citoyen*.”

The slave rebellion constitutes another set of chapters for the education of Henry in this innovative *Bildungsroman*. The dialogue between Edmunds and the Godwinian Parkinson on the wisdom of violent resistance to slavery, which rehearses the debate between Thelwall and Godwin in 1795 over political associations and public meetings,⁴ tilts in Edmunds’s direction when Mozambo defends violence against the planters. The Godwinian position taken by Parkinson—that slavery would be best abolished gradually and nonviolently as it has in almost every other part of the world—receives several rebuttals: while Edmunds cannot imagine the planters voluntarily giving up something from which they acquire so much benefit, Mozambo, a rebellious slave, defends violence as a way to end the slaves’ suffering (*Daughter* 160–64). That Thelwall gives a voice to an imagined slave who is rational rather than simply emotional subverts the racial stereotype, which is nevertheless evoked in the pidgin English Mozambo speaks. In response to Parkinson’s claim that Mozambo has morally compromised himself by acting violently, the African replies: “Me murder him who murder. But me not roast him.

Tyrant! Debbil!! Me not roast him neider. Me not scoff at him dying agony. Me not tell him laugh” (*Daughter* 163). The torture is something the slaves do not imitate, according to Mozambo. Here Thelwall through Mozambo is contesting the biased images of black violence in Bryan Edwards’s and other white accounts, which emphasize the extraordinary ruthlessness of the rebels’ actions. Explaining why he is saving the lives of the Parkinson family and their friends, Mozambo distinguishes between innocent and guilty whites (163), displaying a moral discrimination that runs counter to the dominant story of indiscriminate black violence. When some of the other rebels slaughter women and children, Parkinson calls the rebels “mere ignorant savages” (164), and Edmunds and Henry join a group of white planters and militia who attack “a body of negroes” (165). After they later witness whites inflicting numerous cruelties on the rebels, they regret having sided temporarily with their fellow Europeans, whom they consider infected with “cannibal ferocity” in their retaliation against the blacks (168). Like Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*, the novel turns the charge of cannibalism against the Europeans (Equiano 70–76). Edmunds “was almost frantic. He reproached his master; he reproached himself; and began to execrate an attachment that had led him to act against his principles. He even meditated to make atonement for his error by an immediate revolt to the insurgents” (*Daughter* 168). The reader’s sympathy with the rebellion is made difficult when the slaves hack Mozambo to death while he is protecting Seraphina and her companion Morton; only Henry’s armed intervention prevents Seraphina from being raped. Yet, even after witnessing much violence by the rebels, Seraphina defends the justice of Mozambo’s rebellion: “The atrocities of revolted slaves, can never reconcile me to the tyranny that made them so atrocious” (202). By representing slave atrocities—

what Kitson has aptly called a “worst case scenario”—Thelwall hopes to strengthen the power of his abolitionist argument because he has provided a rational context by which the violence can be understood (Kitson, “John Thelwall in Saint Domingue” 124).

Thelwall took Mozambo’s name from one of his planter sources, Baron de Wimpffen, and the outlines of the story from another planter source, Bryan Edwards, but he fashioned these materials to undermine Wimpffen’s counter-revolutionary ideas and Edwards’s defense of the planters. The character St. Valance, Montfort’s business partner, articulates an argument of Edwards’s *Historical Survey*, that the “friends of the blacks” (“*Amis des Noirs*”) assisted the rebellion in material ways. Henry, however, defends being a friend of “the whole human race” (*Daughter* 167–68). Edwards’s account of the rebellion depicts the slaves as both the puppets of European abolitionists and as savages who deserve to be enslaved (Edwards 3: xvii). Edwards makes a Burkean argument by attributing to reformers like the *Amis des Noirs* the power to inspire the rebellious slaves; the chain of causation is from the London abolitionists to the *Amis des Noirs* (Grégoire, Brissot, Lafayette, and Robespierre) to the violent slaves in Saint Domingue, just as Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) constructed a chain of causation from Rousseau and the philosophes to English Dissenting liberals like Richard Price to Parisian *sans-culottes* (Burke 8: 61–6). The moral culpability for the violence then rests with the London reformers and abolitionists who express sympathy with the suffering slaves. The *Amis des Noirs*, modeled after the English slave trade abolition association, went beyond their British comrades by advocating outright abolition of slavery (Edwards 3: 17–18). Through the activities and writings of “the pestilent reformers” (3: 62), the *Amis des Noirs* legitimated the idea of racial equality,

which spread to Saint Domingue (3: 44). The great turning point, according to Edwards, was the decree of 15 May 1791 initiated by Grégoire that free blacks and mulattos be granted the full rights of citizenship. Thus the reformers abolished the “taint” of blackness and undermined slavery itself by subverting the norm of racial purity (3: 64).

Edwards’s account of the actual rebellion highlights violence against innocent white people, just as does the influential and frequently reprinted pamphlet, *A Particular Account . . .* (1792) (3: 72–73). Indeed, Edwards’s *Historical Survey* is a greatly expanded version of the earlier pamphlet, issued by the planters of Saint Domingue as they made their protests to the Assembly in Paris. The atrocity narratives are framed as Gothic horror stories: in the middle of the night innocent people are seized and hacked to death in their beds. Edwards’s narrative, which accents the violation of the domestic sphere, is focalized through individual families who are murdered and sexually violated (3: 73–4; 3: 99). These scenes of violence are designed to incite retribution and to demonize black men. Burke also knew what he was doing by highlighting the near rape of Marie Antoinette in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (8: 126–8). Thelwall’s novel, in contrast, contextualizes the racial and political dynamics of the attempted rape of Seraphina, who moreover is almost raped later in the novel by the Creole slave trader, Moroon. Sexual violence is not something associated wholly with black men.

Thelwall used ironically and critically a source like Edwards’s *Historical Survey* because he himself was one of those derided “pestilent” reformers. According to Edwards’s account, the planters were blameless for the slave uprising because they treated their slaves with leniency; rather, abolitionist propaganda inflamed the minds of the slaves and drove them to rebel (Edwards 3: 88–93). Thelwall uses Edwards’s

Historical Survey to write precisely the kind of abolitionist text Edwards thought was responsible for the slave rebellion.

A recurrent pattern in the novel is one of ironic contrasts and parallels, not just with black and white sexuality, but with social classes and genders. These contrasts and parallels are governed by a feminist, anti-aristocratic, cosmopolitan logic within which upper-class as well as working-class women are forced into forms of prostitution. The white planters' unapologetic exploitation of West Indian enslaved women like the novel's Nananne and Marian, West Indian consorts of Henry Montfort, the novel's hero, parallels the exploitation of London working-class women like Anna Newcomb, mother of the novel's heroine, Seraphina. Similarly, when Henry as an Etonian seduces the economically distressed farmer's daughter, the novel shows the consequences of class and sexual privilege. When the reader comes to the rape scene in the depicted slave rebellion, the novel has already contextualized white male sexuality as predatory and exploitative, providing a parallel with the sexual violence undertaken by the rebelling slaves.

Sexuality is a central focus of the novel, a bold choice by Thelwall in relation to the sentimental conventions of abolitionist writing and contemporary writing in general. Godwin's biography of Mary Wollstonecraft, published in 1798, was savagely attacked by readers offended by the frank representations of his wife's sexual history; the unfinished novel *The Wrongs of Woman* was equally ridiculed for its critique of marriage and defense of female desire. Thelwall's character Anna Newcomb, as well as her daughter Seraphina, the heroine of the novel, seems to be plucked right out of Wollstonecraft's writing. The mother Newcomb is like the character Jemima in *The*

Wrongs of Woman. They are both working-class women who use their sexuality for material gain, they are both prostitutes, but their prostitution is framed complexly, always emphasizing the economic necessity that compels their actions.

The novel undermines essentializing myths of gender and race by negative and positive methods. A negative example is the character of Moroon, a Creole raised by poor mulattos. Moroon, the most morally blighted character in the novel, is a slave trader, smuggler, murderer, and would-be rapist, who was guilty of having sex with his foster mother. His Creole sister Seraphina, adopted by Godwinian and Wollstonecraftian English intellectuals, is the most morally exemplary character in the novel. Thelwall provocatively uses Seraphina to challenge the sexual norms in ways that evoke deliberately the Wollstonecraft scandal. When Seraphina's mother leaves her daughter alone with Henry, she expects that they will have sex and that her daughter as well as herself will ultimately benefit materially from the relationship; she thinks she is pimping out her daughter, for which she feels no qualms. The mother's cynicism, which reflects her unromantic working-class experiences, views sexuality as a means to an end; she "considered . . . the intercourse between the sexes merely as a piece of chicanery; in which the female was to gratify her ambition and promote her worldly prosperity, by playing upon the infatuation of the other sex" (*Daughter* 229–30). Seraphina herself, however, who is in love with Henry, sees their sexual relationship as based on mutual attraction rather than commercial calculation. When the couple begins their intimate relationship on the trip back to England from the West Indies, they are appropriately in a liminal space where the rules of neither the slave society nor the British class society exert complete authority. However, after Seraphina arrives on British soil, this unmarried

young woman is viewed as Henry's "kept mistress," a status that keeps her from having a respectable social life that she wants to have, especially as she aspires to participate fully in intellectual culture, making use of her Godwinian education. At no point in the novel does she express shame for her sexual relationship. It is precisely on Seraphina's attitude toward marriage and sex that the reviews of the novel focus their harshest critical comments (*Daughter* 533–35).

In conclusion, then, the novel's treatment of slavery and the Saint Domingue rebellion courageously challenges the racial construction of sexuality and undermines the influentially racist representations of the rebellion by broadly contextualizing the Haitian Revolution.

Poem: "The Negro's Prayer"

I want to conclude with Thelwall's abolitionist poem, "The Negro's Prayer," first published in 1807 to commemorate the passage of slave trade abolition, and thereafter reprinted frequently.⁵

"The Negro's Prayer"

O SPIRIT! that rid'st in the whirlwind and storm,

Whose voice in the thunder is heard,

If ever from man, the poor indigent worm,

The prayer of affliction was heard;

If black man, as white, is the work of thy hand—

(And who could create him but Thee?)

Oh give thy command—

Let it spread thro' each land,
That Afric's sad sons shall be free!

If, erst when the man-stealer's treacherous guile
Entrap'd me, all thoughtless of wrong,
From my Niciou's dear love, from the infantile smile
Of my Aboo, to drag me along;—
If then, the wild anguish that pierced thro' my heart,
Was seen in its horrors by thee,
O cease my long smart,
And thy sanction impart,
That Afric, at last, may be free!—

If while in the slave-ship, with many a groan,
I wept o'er my sufferings in vain;
While hundreds around me reply'd to my moan
And the clanking of many a chain:—
If then thou but deign'st, with a pitying eye,
Thy poor shackled creature to see,
Oh thy mercy apply,
Afric's sorrows to dry,
And bid the poor Negro be free!

If, here, as I faint in the vertical sun,
 And the scourge goads me on to my toil,
 No hope faintly soothing, when labour is done,
 Of one joy my lorn heart to beguile;—
 If thou view'st me, Great Spirit! as one thou has made,
 And my fate as dependent on thee,
 O impart thou thy aid,
 That the scourge may be stay'd,
 And the Black Man, at last, may be free.

Thus pray'd the poor Negro; with many a groan,
 Whole nations reecho'd the prayer;—
 Heaven bent down its ear,—and the fiat is known,
 Which Britain, in thunder shall bear.—
 Yes hear it, ye Isles of the Westering deep!
 The Lords of the Ocean maintain,
 No traffic of blood
 Shall pollute the green flood,
 And freedom, for Afric shall reign.

The original *Monthly Magazine* version was lacking the final stanza, which shifts perspective from the slave to an external narrator. The first version, then, is a four-stanza monologue framed as a prayer to the Great Spirit, but the form of the poem—heavily

anapestic with the last line of each stanza functioning as a refrain—creates a song-like effect. Also song-like are the rhyme scheme and stanza form, which are essentially two quatrains, with the second quatrain having the next to the last line split into two rhyming parts. Viewed as a radical abolitionist song, the slave’s monologue depicts a narrative of captivity and separation from family and home (stanza 2), the middle passage (stanza 3), and plantation labor (stanza 4). In the first version of the poem without the fifth stanza, the slave’s prayer for freedom is performed while he is toiling under the whip, dramatically appealing to the reader’s empathy.

The fifth stanza, which appears in all versions of the poem other than the *Monthly Magazine*’s, shifts to a third-person narrator, who celebrates the slave-trade abolition explicitly, while at the same time appropriating the empathy for the slave in uncompromisingly abolitionist terms: Africa should be free of empire, and slavery should be abolished everywhere. The slave’s monologue, which affirms racial equality, moves back and forth between individual experience and collective identity, between the particular and the universal. The fifth stanza reinforces these affirmations and movements with the imagery of hearing—groans are reechoed, Heaven bends its ear: “Yes hear it.” A typical Thelwall emphasis in his poetics, as Judith Thompson has explained, is oral performance, the experience of speaking and hearing as forms of knowing (Thompson 21–45).

To conclude: for Thelwall slavery was a fundamental violation of human rights but it was not something that could be isolated from other forms of oppression. Empire, sexuality, commercial immorality, and nationalism provide contexts for making slavery meaningful in a broadly political way. Thelwall’s abolitionist approach is distinctive for

being unsentimental, especially its refusal to enlist the African or Native American as a convert to Christianity or the British Empire or European culture. As Marcus Wood points out, the poem is Shelleyan in its uncompromising focus on the evils of racism and empire. The liberation depicted in the poem leaves little room for utopian fantasies about a free-labor version of imperial control of Africa. As Wood aptly phrases it, “Thelwall keeps things solidly Afrocentric and unchristian” (239). Although the original *Monthly Magazine* version of the poem was lacking the final stanza of tribute to the British abolitionist movement, the new stanza does not weaken the poem’s ideological power, but brings the focus back to the British audience, which is invited to expand its horizons to ‘whole nations’ and to renew its efforts

Notes

¹ For a text of the play and commentary on Thelwall’s manuscript plays, see Frank Felsenstein and Michael Scrivener, eds., *Incle and Yarico and The Incas: Two Plays by John Thelwall* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2006).

² See also Peter J. Kitson, “Coleridge’s Anecdote of John Thelwall,” *Notes and Queries* 32.3 (September 1985): 345.

³ On enthusiasm, see Jon Mee, *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005).

⁴ See Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories*, 59–60.

⁵ It first appeared in the *Monthly Magazine* 23 (April 1807): 252–53. See the bibliographical note in *Daughter* (521). I am reproducing here the version in the *Poetical Register* (1814) (350–51).

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