

ROSALIE SMITH McCREA

Rosalie Smith McCrea is an Art Historian who currently teaches part-time at the University of Ottawa. Her doctoral thesis presented to Manchester University in 2001 examined the variety of professional and amateur artists of both genders who represented the Black in the period of Antislavery (1760-1841). She looked specifically at the work coming out of the Royal Academy and other academies in Edinburgh, and in Dublin. Her curatorial exhibitions have brought together artists in Jamaica (the National Gallery, Kingston) and in Canada (artist-run-centres, Toronto) who have explored contemporary issues using traditional and new media techniques. Rosalie's present interests are concerned with the cultural production and the social formation in the former British West Indies between 1660 and 1860 with an emphasis on all manner of art/artefact production created, lost, or un-acknowledged from the Creole population regardless of colour.

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Dis-Ordering the World in the 18th Century

The Duplicity of Connoisseurship: Masking the Culture of Slavery, or,

The Voyage of the Sable Venus: Connoisseurship and the Trivializing of Slavery

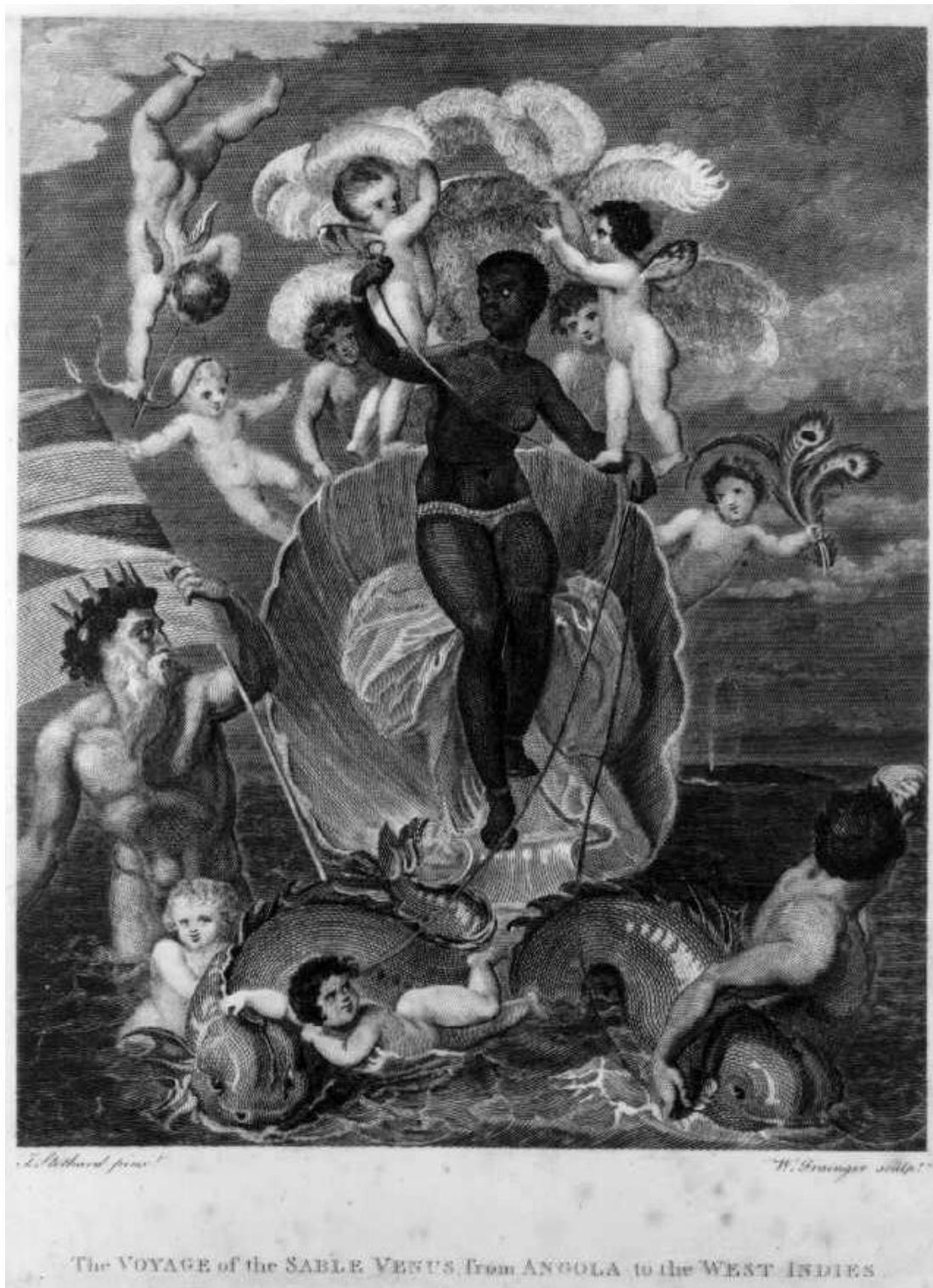
Dr Rosalie Smith McCrea,

Abstract

This paper explores some of the reasons why the rare image of a black enslaved woman was given hierarchical prominence in a British painting at a time when women generally were perceived as the weaker disempowered sex and black women, in particular, under the full rigor of West Indian plantation chattel slavery were accorded neither human, civil nor economic rights. I am concerned, therefore, with an image that enforced a breakdown of order during the period of Antislavery. The engraving that survives was produced after a painted-illustration based on a verse poem of the same title. It involved the interests of a book-publisher in London, a West Indian slave owner and historian, besides the painter, a Royal Academician. My paper examines the ways in which the painter negotiated the the rules of academic propriety while trying to keep to the spirit of the painting's "Sister Art" - poetry, in order to represent such an inappropriate and

sordid theme for commercial interests. In doing so, some of the perceptions at the time between free painting and illustrating texts are brought to the fore. (The painted-illustration was thought to be of a secondary value. This perception diminished as the 19th century progressed). Stothard was able to exploit his knowledge of academic discourse (Reynolds's Discourses for instance) while keeping to the general spirit of the poem. Illustration and poem differ in subtle details and the paper illuminates upon these differences. By placing the Sable Venus in a Sea Triumph, Stothard appeared to have ensured that his black African slave would be ensconced within an old mythological "topos" which had by then become an established feature in British visual iconography. One conclusion which may be drawn is that painters attached to the Royal Academy in accepting commissions of such a nature often resorted to connoisseurship in order to uplift inappropriate themes and better appeal to patrons or potential collectors.

More important, my paper advances the view that Stothard's illustration after its correspondence the poem, directs us (a 21st century audience) to notions of hybridity and diasporic culture in the Americas as put forward by theoretical writers such as Homi Bhabha, Michael Dash and Gerardo Mosquero for instance; that history, commerce and colonial interests were key factors in forging new societies and new identities defined by creolite in regions such as the West Indies where, for the eighteenth-century British painter, British verse-writer and West Indian Creole planter and historian, these recognized and suppressed forces were already in the making.



Thomas Stothard R.A. (1755-1834)

The Voyage of the Sable Venus From Angola to the West Indies. In the manner of Raphael Sanzio, Poussin and others c.1793-94 (RSM^c). Collection: British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings, London, vol. 1C*.20. No.40-7-4-355. Dated 1800. Engraved by William Grainger. Location of painted-illustration unknown

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Preamble

This paper seeks to isolate and describe the conventions in painting and poetry that animated the discursive image before us. A rare image of an idealized enslaved black woman has been given central prominence in a British history painting at a time when women were, generally, perceived as the weaker disempowered sex and black women in particular, under the full rigour of West Indian plantation chattel slavery, were accorded neither human, civil nor economic rights. I am concerned with an image, therefore, that enforced a breakdown of order during the period of Antislavery.¹

During the period of British Trans-Atlantic slavery and the debates for its abolition, representations of free black women as individualized subjects in portraiture or as models in painting were hardly produced. Representations of black slave women were even rarer. Portrayals of black individual subjects or models were usually men and boys and they appeared in a small number of Portraits, Subject and History Paintings at leading exhibitions of the day.²

This paper presents a discussion around a visual illustration that was produced for the book-publishing trade in the late 18th century, the main image of which has meaning in relationship to Graeco-Roman civilization and Italian Renaissance culture. While the location of the painted-illustration by Thomas Stothard is unknown, the image survives in William Grainger's engraving after it, now in the British Museum. My paper examines the engraving in relationship to a poem of the same title, two different media at work. Each practice participated in a variety of systems,

hierarchies of genres and various discourses of knowledge that coalesced to produce a complex statement about the human creative faculty. It is my purpose here to analyze some of the conscious and unconscious strategies and conventions of late 18th century culture that were assimilated by the four leading players in the period responsible for bringing about this iconoclastic image, an image that appears to break down established racial codes at the time.

A Word on Method

My paper is written from the perspective that signification can never be attributed to a single coherent theory. Today, there is a proliferation of competing methods available in the academy for the enhancement of knowledge. I examine the poem and the engraving from an intertextual perspective as well as the social and historical contexts of slavery. Towards the end of my paper, I apply aspects of postcolonial discourse theory applicable to the context and content of the image. The five personalities involved in the creation of this image were: Isaac Teale, the poet, Thomas Stothard, Royal Academician (1755-1834), John Stockdale, the book-publisher (1749?-1814), Bryan Edwards slave owner, planter and historian (1743-1800) and William Grainger (dates unknown). Now a word on what and who Bryan Edwards and Thomas Stothard were.

Brief Biographies

In 1792, Bryan Edwards (1743-1800), Jamaican planter, politician and apologist for slavery, retired in England. As an ardent supporter of proslavery interests within the ‘West India Lobby’, he had campaigned in Jamaica and in the British House of Commons. Wilberforce considered him “a powerful opponent of slave trade abolition”.³ Edwards argued against immediate Abolition and, like most proslavers, he put forward statistics to show that the slave trade brought great wealth to Britain. In 1792, he valued the capital vested in Jamaica alone at £39,000,000.⁴

The following year, *The History Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies*⁵ was published. The work established Edwards as a serious historian on the subject of British colonial history and West African slavery. It became one of the “bibles” in and outside Parliament

for both antislavers and proslavers, several of whom quoted and misquoted the work during the period. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, for instance, thought that Edwards's history was:

entirely original and comprehends such a mass of intelligence, so interesting and instructive...we cannot hesitate to place Mr. Edwards in the highest rank in the annals of the historic literature of Great Britain.⁶

The following year it was translated into German, thus adding to its level of European authority.⁷ Edwards's *History* had been so well received that he wrote that "my book has sold beyond expectation and the printer presses hard for a corrected copy, that a new edition may appear in the course of January...We intend to have some engravings with the next edition".⁸ It was in this 2nd edition, published in 1794, that the image of the *Sable Venus* first appeared, illustrating the narrative verse poem of the same title.

Edwards was not a "connoisseur", as that word was understood in the period. He had not made the Grand Tour; he was far more interested, I argue, in the "chink of guineas". Connoisseurship, at the time, implied wealth, a detachment from real life and a preference for Old Master paintings, neoclassical fragments, antique casts, coins and *objet d'art* from Greece and Italy.⁹ Described by a contemporary as a "heavy looking-man using language very awkward and un-elegant", Edwards would have made no claims to be the "well-bred man" of the 18th century, as defined earlier by the Earl of Shaftesbury. At the death of his father, his mother was left in poverty with six children. It was through the generosity of her brother, Zachary Baily, a West Indian slave plantation owner, that Bryan Edwards was saved from social and literary oblivion. He acquired membership in three prestigious Societies: Fellow of the Royal Society, a member of the Society of Artists and member of the American Philosophical Society at Philadelphia. Arguably, it was in the area and knowledge of British West Indian colonial history that Bryan Edwards became a "connoisseur".

In producing the 2nd edition, he provided Stockdale with paintings or engravings by Agostino Brunias (fl.1752-1791), the leading itinerant painter for proslavery interests in the Caribbean. The representation before you is an example after Brunias's painting which Edwards also

included in the 2nd edition. It illustrates the propaganda touted by proslavers who convinced themselves that Negroes were always in a state of humble happiness. Earlier, in 1792, the Duke of Clarence, had proclaimed in the House of Lords that: Negroes were happier in the colonies than in their native lands.¹⁰ These views were promoted by respectable Naval heroes such as Rodney and Nelson.¹¹ Rodney was known to Edwards as is borne out by a letter from him addressed to: "My dear Old Friend". The letter makes clear that Rodney, while on naval reconnaissance in Jamaica, was a guest in Edwards' s home.¹² Nelson's views on slavery are observed in a letter to the Jamaican Simon Taylor, in which he stated : "While I have an arm to fight in their defense or a tongue to launch my voice against the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies", he would continue to uphold the rights of Britain's West Indian planters and their possessions.¹³ Historians have pointed out that eminent sailors, like Nelson and Rodney, became the "darlings of the Caribbean plantocracy", owing to the paranoid fear of slave revolts.¹⁴

Thomas Stothard, meanwhile, became a full Royal Academician in 1794, the year Edwards published his 2nd and more expansive edition. He had become one of the leading book-illustrators of the day. Stothard admitted that he was unable to attract patrons from the upper ranks of British society ("princes, dukes, down to right honourables"¹⁵) and so his talents and abilities were mainly employed by the leading print and book-publishers, such as, Cadell and Davies, who wanted single paintings on topical subject matter that would find profitable markets.¹⁶ "Abolition vs Slavery" had become one of the most topical and controversial causes from the late 1760s. Stothard's rise in reputation can be measured by the increasing demand from book-publishers for his illustrations for new literary and historical publications and their reprints.

Some Problems

The main problem concerning the discussion to follow lies in the fact that the original painted-illustration has never been seen since its production in the late 18th century. With any image, one is always working with the physical manipulation of "signs"; the present engraving is no exception but we cannot be sure whether the engraver kept to the painter's construction in every

way or whether figures, images or motifs were modified or subtracted. A question that always has to be borne in mind is: Is this engraving the legitimate/illegitimate analogy-representation-replacement of the original painted-illustration?. For purposes of ease and less difficulty, I shall assume that the engraver replicated the essential details in Stothard's painted-illustration. I now turn to the poem.

The Poem

Isaac Teale, teacher, mentor and friend, wrote the poem in Jamaica in 1765. He titled it *The Sable Venus; an Ode*. Teale, from England, was engaged by Edwards's uncle, Zachary Baily, to instruct his nephew in the "learned languages".¹⁷ Edwards found the classics "disgusting" and admitted to having acquired "small Latin and less Greek". According to Edwards, "Teale pointed out to me the beauties of Horace, and would frequently impose on me the task of translating an ode into English verse, which, with his assistance in construing the words, I sometimes accomplished" (Ibid.,,xiii). He described his teacher's ode as one in which the "character of the sable and saffron beauties of the West Indies, and the folly of their paramours are portrayed with the delicacy and dexterity of wit, fancy and elegance of genuine poetry".¹⁸ "Sable" and "saffron", I might add, were then two adjectives used in more polite circles to describe the varieties of skin pigmentation within West Indian populations. But is this only what the ode is about?

The Ode, was a lyric of a special kind, intended to reproduce the tone of classical Greek or Latin models. By 1765, there was a well established tradition of published English Odes of which there were two main types: the pseudo-Pindaric form or the greater Ode and the lesser or Horatian Ode. The latter I argue, is the model that Teale employed. For while it was generally more intimate and less ambitious in tone with a comparatively simple stanzaic structure, it managed to maintain a degree of formality distinguishing it from mere song.¹⁹ *The Sable Venus; An Ode* was written in 26 stanzas. Its language is metaphorical and excessively baroque. It is prefaced by a quotation from Virgil. We will never know whether the poem had a more private meaning for the poet or whether it was written as an exercise in parody only, a fantasy of deception to amuse his charge, who, in 1765, was 22 years old. Its meaning can signify on several levels for the work's

separate publics or, be understood as a 'conceit' built around the dissembling of logic, nevertheless, a pastiche.

First, the quotation from Virgil: "Alba ligustra cadunt vaccinia nigra liguntur". One leading classical scholar translates this as: "the white privets fall, the dark hyacinths are culled".²⁰ We know immediately that we are not presented with an ode as an organic whole but as an intertextual construct relating to other cited texts and conventions, for *Eclogue II*, from which it was appropriated, was modeled on Theocritus. This Eclogue contains two narratives, both concerned with the madness of unrequited love and desire. The narrative from which Teale specifically draws from Virgil, recites the tale of Corydon, a shepherd with musical pretensions, who burns with a love for Alexis, the fastidious city-bred slave boy and pet of Corydon's master Iollas. Corydon pours out his fruitless passion to the woods and the hills, ending his song with the salutary advice to his beloved: "Ah lovely boy, trust not too much to your bloom! The white privets fall, the dark hyacinths are culled"²¹ Virgil's line which Teale employs alludes to the homoerotic and unrequited love that Corydon experienced for Alexis. Corydon ends his lament by consoling himself that as he is scorned by the object of his desire, so shall he find another less fastidious Alexis. We may infer that what is implied is that beautiful boys such as Alexis were in abundance in "Arcadia". Still, Virgil also alludes to the impermanence of physical beauty. How then is my reading of this quotation applicable to the rhetoric advanced in the Ode?

Teale reverted to the convention of the English Horatian [apostrophic] ode. In its origin, the ode was meant to be sung or read to a listener. It was sung by a Greek chorus in a Greek play, often a lyric rhyme in the form of an address with an exalted style and irregular metre about 50-200 lines in length. In these earlier contexts it was seen as part of sublime poetry. If we opt for Teale's poetic invention as an exercise in helping his student, then the notion of Teale's troping on "communication" *per se*, attempting to link his voice to a reader's [his student Edwards] is plausible. Literary critics today regard the apostrophic mode as pretentious.²² They argue that it should be discussed not only because of its artificial nature but also as the craft of poetry is demeaned by its use.²³ It works according to one critic if it "produces a fictive discursive event".²⁴ To this, I shall return later.

Before discussing Teale's personal address of voice, his attitude and tone, it is useful to outline the rhetoric that the Ode advances. The *Sable Venus; An Ode* begins with the poet taking up his lyre and invoking a "Sable Queen" who becomes his Muse instructing him to write an ode showing his gratitude to her while shaping the 'persona' of the poet's identity. The poet informs his reader/listener that his project is an "unusual theme"(Stanza 4). He begins the fantasy by having his sable queen leave Angola, unusual in the extreme, a paradox even, given that Angola was a colony of Portugal and not of Britain. Teale, it appears, conjures up an imaginary site (his euphemism for slavery?) in order to sustain his imagery of invested passion. Critics tell us that this was the leading role of the ode, the investment of passion, sustained in the vocative voice.

The sable queen journeys across the ocean on a throne in a car empanelled with coral shells, ivory and amber. She is accompanied by peacocks, "wanton breezes" that fan her breasts and dolphins that draw her chariot. Her skin, eyes, lips and "loveliest limbs" are described metaphorically. In continuing to assert what is false and lacking in correspondence to reality within the literature and the sociology of slavery, Teale casts his African beauty in the same light as her sister Venus in Florence (Stanza 15). Such excesses were at variance with proslavery and some abolitionist notions of black beauty and potential.²⁵ West Indian historians point out that Bryan Edwards, writing of Ebo slaves, confessed that: "I cannot help observing that the confirmation of a face, in a great majority of them, very much resembles that of a baboon".²⁶ So, contrary to common notions about "animal" West Africa, the origin of many slaves, Teale would apostrophize: 'O sable Queen! thy mild domain I seek, and court thy gentle reign'.²⁷ The point here is that Teale's black chattel slave has been envisioned and constructed as a white European heroine.

Stanzas 16 to 26 describe the Sable Venus's journey through the 'Middle Passage' in which the poet eschews the lurid inhuman practices of throwing blacks overboard to hungry sharks. Instead, the captain of a British warship who, I suggest, is a mask for Bryan Edwards, spying her chariot, seduces her. The Sable Venus is enthralled by his advances. He bares his heart to her and all pagan life and marine nature celebrate their love and implied union.

The Ode ends when all of Jamaica, in particular, the Island's "people of quality", from Port Royal, Spanish Town and Kingston, come to greet the Sable Venus. The poet ends his song by declaring his utter loyalty to her, whether she alters her persona, appearing as a Phibba, a Benneba, a Mimba, Cuba or Quasheba, all names of female slaves at the time, as borne out by traditional and modern historians of slavery.²⁸ The reader/listener is suddenly brought back to the present in being reminded of the poem's "unlucky theme", a theme chosen by Bryan Edwards, the reluctant student who disdains the classics.

Teale was fully aware that the fantasy and excesses within the Ode were created to his liking and that his constructed universe went against the 18th century's order of things. By describing the theme of the Ode as "unlucky" and "unusual", we are never sure whether his heart went out to his fictive heroine, the *Sable Queen*, who, for the poet, may have embodied all of West Africa and who was destined for a fate in stark contradistinction to his fiction. Teale's attitude and tone may be summed up as playful, polite and tenderly engaged. It is also filled with irony and, in a few places, with subtle sarcasm. The poem carries within it certain elements of tension, ambiguity and ambivalence in the address. Overall, the thematic operators of irony and paradox are deployed. In 1728, Edward Young (1683-1765), in a discourse *On lyric Poetry*, wrote that thoughts in the ode should be "uncommon, sublime and moral".²⁹ Teale, I put forward, deployed a pseudoclassical high art form to clothe a subject matter considered immoral and inappropriate at the time.

What was the poem's effect, and, how would it have been received by late 18th and early 19th centuries readers? How do readers today, some of whom originate from postcolonial contexts, make it legible? These questions cannot be fully answered in this paper. Some of the answers, I venture, lie in the response, the counterdialectic of the painted-illustration by Stothard and its engraving by William Grainger. I now describe some of the conventions and strategies that appear to have been invested in the engraving.

The Painting/Engraving

How does the engraving interact with the Ode? Painter/engraver represented the Ode by selecting basic conventions which had meaning for late 18th century high art culture. I seek to make sense of some of them by bringing forward the convergencies and divergencies between the ode and its sister art, the painting/engraving. The painter/engraver made sense of the poem by selecting stanzas 10-18 for illustration. Both accepted the potent literary tradition of *ut pictura poesis* and deployed academic theories that upheld history painting as the leading model for representation and idealization of the human form for treatments within those pictures. During the period, the relationship between poetry and painting had been reiterated in many texts and set down in influential and canonical theoretical writings. One such were the “Discourses” of Sir Joshua Reynolds (1721-1792).³⁰ Stothard appeared to have heeded, in particular, Reynolds's Discourse 8 on grace, energy, animation, posture and motion and Discourses 4 and 5 on the efficacies in the works of Raphael. In these writings, Reynolds had advised students and potential history painters to copy consistently and to imitate the Old Masters as well as to revere the antique statuary of the ancients.³¹ Painter and engraver created a new and rare image of a black slave woman in motion. James Barry's ideas on “grace”, from his 2nd RA Lecture, is also evident. Barry had stipulated that “mere Beauty...becomes infinitely more powerful and fascinating when it is in action and associated with the Graces”.³²

The theory of the “Sister Arts” was an old classical literary theory drawn from the Roman writer Horace. *Ut pictura poesis (as a poem, so a painting)* maintained that themes, befitting poet and painter, were expected to offer serious interpretations and impart wisdom to their publics, for it was on the basis of this relationship that painting ultimately achieved the status of a “liberal art” in the 17th century.³³ British artists could heighten their inventive powers by producing significant high-minded works worthy of the Academy and the nation. By the late 1790s however, the tradition of “as a poem, so a painting” was being seriously challenged by other views.

The engraving further converges with the Ode as it is even more intertextualized. The main image of a black slave woman in motion relates to the classical public triumphal spectacle and

other visual discourses such as those relevant to classical antique statuary that had been in place since Graeco-Roman times. These neoclassical antiquarian knowledges, we should remember, were emulated and understood only by a few in the 18th century. The engraving is also defined by the limits of painting and engraving technique in the period when they sought to correspond to each other.

The visually represented stanzas (10-18) center around the Sable Venus's mode of transportation across the ocean, her car, her train, drawn by classical marine animal life. Verses describe her physical beauty, the breezes which fan her breast and the captain of a "man of war", captivated by her "kind, consenting eyes". Stothard /Grainger selected the "Sea Triumph", a commonplace "topos", and a generic sign invested with classical Greek, Roman and Italian Renaissance signification. Sea Triumphs adopted meaning from the Roman practice of senators honoring victorious generals through the streets of Rome in a triumphal chariot drawn by white horses in a procession. The practice was modified to conform to Italian Renaissance and Baroque painting where triumphal cars, bearing allegorical, mythological and historical figures, are surrounded by their appropriate attributes and attendants.³⁴ When represented mythologically (as indeed is the case here), a presupposition appears to have been that this kind of knowledge, which had social and literary origins, would have been understood by those who were in a position to buy, read or collect Edwards's *History*. Few in number, they would have been mainly educators, historians, MPs, bibliophiles or connoisseurs of the print.³⁵ Stothard produced many "Sea Triumphs" in his career.³⁶ Not only are social practices and literary traditions (allegory and myth) recalled but the practices of high art sculpture and painting. Sculpture is recalled in the *Venus Pudica* or *Chaste Venus* (a work that had so much iconic power in the 18th century, a cast of which stood in the Royal Academy and was much admired in Stothard's day) and in Raphael's *The Triumph of Galatea* and possibly Poussin's *The Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite*, two old masters, whose works were prestigious and in demand at the time.³⁷ [Raphael's *Galatea* (1511-12, Villa Farnese, Rome; the *Venus Pudica*, marble, H: 1.44m, Uffizi, Florence; Poussin's *Triumph of Neptune and Amphitrite* c.1637, Philadelphia Museum of Art] These paintings and sculpture are certainly encoded knowledge systems within the engraving. I now turn to some divergences between the ode and the engraving.

Divergences between the Ode and the Engraving

The painter/engraver kept mainly to the known visual iconography of representing “Sea Triumphs”. How? By having Tritons and Nereids lead the Sable Venus’s train. He departed from tradition, however, by conceiving the Sable Venus not as a “*Venus*” but as the figure of *Galatea* who, like the Sable Venus in the engraving, rides in a cockle shell car and is pulled by dolphins.³⁸ There are other modifications that included *putti and amoretti*. A child cupid directs his arrow at the heart of the God Neptune/Poseidon [Bryan Edwards?] who, in the Ode, is described as a young Captain of a “man of war”. Neptune carries the Union Jack (surely a reminder of British maritime power in the construction of empire). *Amoretti* fan the breasts of the Sable Venus with peacock and ostrich feathers, protecting her from the “noon-day’s sultry flame” (Stanza 11). In the far right, a whale spouting a geyser is observed on the horizon, an incidental detail added by the painter or the engraver that is not voiced in the Ode.

The Sable Venus stands centrally in classical contrapposto; the sign of noble grace. Her robe has fallen to the base of the car. Her other adornments are a metal wrist bracelet, a pearl or coral necklace, a loin girdle of precious stones and ankle amulets. The loin girdle is an unusual addition and with its exception all other features conform to Travel Writers’ descriptions of West African female dress worn by certain classes and tribes between 1760 and 1800.³⁹ Still, her figure is somewhat mannered and muscular. I suggest that Stothard may have drawn after the antique cast at the Royal Academy. Students and teachers were encouraged to do so in Life classes because female models at the Royal Academy were regarded with suspicion. Rules regarding the naturalistic depiction of the female nude were just beginning to become less doctrinaire.⁴⁰ As far as I know, there were no rules regarding the black female model at the time.

Some Conclusions

As I embark on my own interpretations, I again point to the complexity of the engraving; one that is underlaid by literary, painterly, sculptural theories and social practices, amongst other things.

Problems are compounded by not having seen the original painted-illustration. Had the engraver modified any aspect of the work through hubris and skill? One conclusion which may be firmly drawn is that, while the painter/engraver kept mainly to the Ode's descriptive text, the image of the Sable Venus was not conceived as a *Venus* figure but as the figure of *Galatea*, a Nereid and sea-nymph, who in the pantheon of Graeco-Roman pagan life did not have the same status as the goddess "Venus". This automatically again presents us with the question as to how readers/recipients and /bibliophiles, understood her meaning, once recognizing this discrepancy between the poem and the painter's divergence from traditional European iconography.

Teale's Ode was a successful pastiche of the English neoclassical tradition of ode writing. Its rhetoric, ensconced in metaphorical language, concealed the sordidness of slavery, meaning other than what it said. The Sable Venus travels in a "car", for instance, when surely what was meant, was the unvoiced reality of the "Slave Ship". The poet produced a fantasy or fictive discursive event that actually took place with the arrival of each new Slave Ship ". This, I maintain, may have been the 'public' reason for writing the Ode, heralding the arrival of a new shipment of chattel slaves who were vital to the economics of the plantation and from among whose numbers white slave owner men, such as the young Bryan Edwards?], could sexually exploit. J. Michael Dash, arguing with Gordon Lewis, writes that the Caribbean had always been a fantasy theatre for the imaginations of many European travelers, adventurers and missionaries.⁴¹ The "Island" was often seen as a geography to exploit and plantation slavery became the longest and most destructive of all these interventionist events and activities.

The Sable Venus in both poem and painting is mindless of the implications and purpose of her voyage. The real chattel Sable Slave, upon alighting on new territory, would be confronted with the "Seasoning Process", slaves becoming accustomed to new territory. If not forced onto a sugar plantation, Phibba, Mimba, Cuba, Benneba and Quasheba will join the hierarchy of black domestic staff in the "Great House", situated on a hill overlooking a vast estate. She will join the sordid *ménage* and bored lives of an overseer and his wife, usually from the British under-classes, many perhaps lacking culture in its broadest of senses. Those were her new owners, men and

women whom the educated classicist Teale, the poet, and planter-historian Edwards, writer of the *History*, were in the best position to know, having lived in Jamaica for a number of years.

Poet and engraver deployed high art conventions and genres to render their image of the *Sable Venus* acceptably “European” (the poet) and idealized (the painter/engraver). The masquerade of escapism and untruth is borne out in having her constructed as pliant and unthreatening.⁴² Is this why Teale had her originate from Angola? It was a well known fact that West Indian slave owners preferred Angolan and Congo Africans to Coromantee Africans from the Gold Coast because Angolans (the *Sable Venus* being one) were both cheaper and reputedly less troublesome and less resistant to slavery.⁴³

More significantly, is the unconscious direction in which both poet and engraver point our attention. Poet and engraver direct us towards diasporic culture and hybrid identities in the Americas, particularly as it concerned Negro/Caucasian admixtures. The Ode’s content describes euphemistically what came to be known as “miscegenation”,⁴⁴ it entirely erases the practice of black female sexual exploitation within slavery’s culture.⁴⁵ The engraving encodes the private homoerotic and heterosexual modes of transgressive love and its significance for the ancient poet Virgil, and the modern poet Teale. Teale, however, combined the two, slipping from the former mode to the latter, a racial erotic transgression common in his time and, expressed as a fantasy between the black heroine and white colonizer, sea captain -slaver-owner [Bryan Edwards?].

Can we observe a location of Caribbean culture in the poem and engraving? The notion and experience of “culture” has changed since the 18th century and many historians of culture, literature and abolition have sought to understand these changes (I think, here, of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, J. M. Dash, and Édouard Glissant, amongst others). The engraving of the *Sable Venus* does fit into a postcolonial space, for, to quote Homi Bhabha, “the location of culture is not in some pure core inherited from tradition, but at the edges of contact between civilizations where new ‘in-between’ or hybrid identities are forged”.⁴⁶ Opinions such as these as it relates to the *Sable Venus* make us aware how impossible it is to fully exhaust an image that communicates. The engraving resonates with meanings and awaits further readings.

Rosalie Smith McCrea, August, 2002, Ottawa, Canada.

- I would like to thank Alvina Ruprecht, Associate Professor in Francophone Caribbean Literature and Theatre at Carleton University, Ottawa, for reading the paper and offering further suggestions as to my understanding of the Ode as a tradition of poetic writing. This helped immeasurably in my reading of the image.

¹ Historians refer to this period as the "Age of Revolution". Dates for this period vary, but for the purposes of this paper the period of Antislavery will be regarded as between ca. 1760-1841 i.e. the period which included the abolition of the slaving of West Africans (1807) and the emancipation of West Indian plantation slaves (1833-38).

² Between these dates the leading exhibition fora were: The Royal Academy of Arts (London); the British Institution (London); the Society of Artists of Great Britain and the Free Society of Artists (London); the Royal Scottish Academy (Edinburgh), and, the Royal Hibernian Academy (Dublin). See Rosalie Smith McCrea, *Antislavery and British Painting of the Black, 1760 to 1841*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. University of Manchester, 2001, Introduction.

³ *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by Sir Leslie Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee (London and Oxford: Geoffrey Cumberledge, 1950), vol. IV, p. 530.

⁴ Sir William Young, bart., *The West-Indian Common-place book: compiled from Parliamentary and official documents; showing the interest of Great Britain in its Sugar Colonies* (London, Printed for R. Phillips, 1807), p. 25.

⁵ 2 vols (London: John Stockdale, 1794). The first London edition and a Dublin impression were published in 1793. A third edition with considerable additions followed in 1801 (London: John Stockdale), and the fifth and last edition (6 vols) was published between 1818 and 1819.

⁶ *The Gentleman's Magazine*, November, 1793, p. 1017.

⁷ M. C. Sprengel, *Beschreibung der Britteschen Kolonien in Westindiene*, Bde, 1.2., 1794. Today, some leading historians of "Abolition and Slavery" describe this work as being: "a classic and sober insight into West Indian society". See, Michael Craton, James Walvin and David Wright, *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Black Slaves and the British Empire* (London and New York: 1976), p. 273.

⁸ Bryan Edwards. Letter to Edward Long, 1 December 1793. Printed in Robert Mowbray Howard ed. *Records and Letters of the family of the Longs of Longville, Jamaica, and Hampton Lodge, Surrey* 2 vols (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1925), p. 294. British Library. 9907.a.1.

⁹ Recent scholarship has shown that a large portion of these collections were copies and frauds.

¹⁰ U.K. Duke of Clarence. Speech to the House of Lords on the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 3 May 1792. *Parliamentary Debates* (Lords). vol. 29 (1817), col. 1349.

¹¹ For Rodney see *Ibid.*, "Debate on Mr Wilberforce's Motion for the Abolition of the Slave Trade", (Commons), 2 April 1792, colls. 1078-1079. For Nelson see, Garth Lean, *God's Politician: William Wilberforce's Struggle* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), p. 46.

¹² *Ackermann's Repository* No. 22. October 1810, pp. 224-5. Edwards worked closely with his publisher Stockdale in the production of his second edition. He went out of his way to provide Stockdale with engraved plates by Agostino Brunias (fl.1752-1791), the leading itinerant artist who had earlier accompanied Sir William Young, the Elder baronet to his sugar estates in Dominica, St. Vincent and Tobago. The image before you is an example of an engraving after Brunias's painting which Edwards included in his 2nd edition. It illustrates the propaganda touted by proslavers

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- ¹³ Lord Nelson to Simon Taylor, Esq., Jamaica. On board "Victory" of Martinique 11 June, 1805 in John Knox Laughton (ed.), *The Naval Miscellany* (London: Navy Record Society, 1901), vol. I, p. 439 in Smith McCrea, *Antislavery and British Painting*, p. 130, fn.252.
- ¹⁴ Gordon K. Lewis, *Slavery, Imperialism and Freedom: Studies in English Radical Thought* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1978), p. 26.
- ¹⁵ Thomas Stothard. Letter to G. Cumberland, Monday, 24 May 1813. British Library. MS. Add. 36504, f.91.
- ¹⁶ Shelley Margaret Bennet, "Thomas Stothard R.A." (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California and Los Angeles, 1977), p. 55; published as *Thomas Stothard: The Mechanisms of Art Patronage in England c. 1800*, (Columbia Missouri, 1988). My thanks to Brian Allen, Paul Mellon Centre, London for bringing these two works to my attention.
- ¹⁷ See "Sketch of the Life of the Author, written by Himself a short Time before his Death" in *The History Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies By Bryan Edwards* Third Edition vol 3. (1801), xi-xii. Teale was mentioned in an ode titled: *Jamaica, A Fragment* in *Ackermann's Repository*, No. 43, (London, 1812), pp.54-58; August No. 44, pp. 117-121; September No. 45, pp. 180-182. See also Peter C. Hogg, "Imaginative Literature" in *The African Slave Trade and its Suppression: A Classified and Annotated Bibliography of Books, Pamphlets and Periodical Articles* (London: Frank Cass, 1973), p. 325.
- ¹⁸ *The History Civil and Commercial* Third edition. vol. 2, Bk. 4. Ch. 1, (London, 1801), p. 31.
- ¹⁹ John Heath-Stubbs, *The Ode* (Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 3. The favourite Greek and Roman models for the English School were:Pindar, Sappho, Alcaeus, Anacreon and Horace.
- ²⁰ Dilwyn Knox, "Virgil Eclogue II, 18" with English Transl. By H. Rushton Fairclough.in *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I-VI* 2 vols, (London & New York: William Heinemann, G.P.Putnam & Sons, 1916), pp. 10-11. See this edition revised by G.P.Goold (Cambridge, Mass., London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 31-37.
- ²¹ Knox and Fairclough, pp. 10-11. British Library 2282/D/35. See G. P. Goold (ed), revised edition (1999), p. 32, l.18.
- ²² Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 12-154.
- ²³ Ibid, p. 154.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 154.
- ²⁵ See Ch. I: "God's Image Though Cut in Ebony:The Rhetoric of Abolition and Slavery, 1760-1841" in Smith McCrea unpublished doctoral thesis, pp. 58-61.
- ²⁶ Edward Braithwaite, "Creative Literature of the British West Indies During the Period of Slavery", *Savacou*, vol. I, no. 1, (June 1970), p. 50.
- ²⁷ Stanzas 5 and 6 from *The Sable ; An Ode* in *The History Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, Third Edition. vol II, (London: 1801), p. 33.
- ²⁸ See Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica, or General Survey of the Ancient and Modern State of that Island* 3 vols (London: Printed for T. Lowndes, 1774), vol. II, Bk 3, p. 427. See also Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* (MacGibbon & Kee, 1967), p. 150, n.6.
- ²⁹ A preface to his *Ocean:An Ode* published in 1728. Young's opinion was that "fire, elevation and select thought are indispensable; an humble, tame and vulgar ode is the most pitiful error a pen can commit". See John Heath-Stubbs, p. 52.
- ³⁰ The "Discourses" were directed to all artists but particularly to potential History Painters. They were published separately over the period 1769 to 1790. See Robert R. Wark, ed. *Sir Joshua Reynolds Discourses* (San Marino California: Huntington Library, 1959).
- ³¹ Reynolds's "Discourses" were published separately over the period 1769 to 1790. See Robert R. Wark ed. *Sir Joshua Reynolds Discourses* (San Marino California: Huntington Library, 1959).
- ³² Shelley Margaret Bennet, Thomas Stothard R.A., pp. 109-110. See Lectures on Painting by the Royal Academicians Barry, Opie and Fuseli by Ralph W. Wornum ed. pp. 104-5. Stothard was deeply influenced by Visitors to the Academy of which James Barry (1779-1783) was one. In 1782 Barry was appointed Professor of Painting and in 1784 he delivered his *Lectures on Art*. Bennet, p. 41.
- ³³ See Rensselaer Lee, "Ut Pictura Poesis", *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 22, no. 4, (December 1940): 197-269.
- ³⁴ Renaissance Italy in its love of public spectacle modified it to emulate princes, military leaders and pagan gods/goddesses in poetry and painting. Some of the earlier literary forms of the Sea Triumph appear in the works of

Dante and Petrarch. See James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (London: John Murray, 1987 rept.), p. 310.

³⁵ See James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (London: John Murray, 1987 rept.), p. 310.

³⁶ See his *Triumph of Aphrodite* BMDPD No. 1868-8-22-6818 and *The Triumph of Neptune*, MSS Engravings after Stothard vol. I, BMDPD No C*/20. One of the earliest Sea Triumphs that I have encountered associated with the British School is a frontispiece engraving for Phillip de Cardonnel's *Complementarum Fortunatarum Insularum* (London, 1622) titled: "With Crowns of Peace and Love, Kind Heavens on Katherine Smile", engrvd. by "IA". The image describes the arrival of Catherine of Braganza on 13 May, 1662 going to meet her future husband Charles II who waits expectantly on the shore with two courtiers. She is drawn in a shell with wheels pulled by Nereids and Tritons playing trumpets, lutes and harps accompanied by four large maritime vessels. In the heavens and angel is about to crown her with a laurel wreath. See Franklyn B. Zimmerman, *Henry Purcell 1659-1695: His Life and Times* (London and N.Y: MacMillan, 1969), p. 31.

³⁷ For more on the **Celestial Venus** or **Venus Pudica** see Joseph [Giuseppe] Baretti, *A Guide through the Royal Academy*, London (1781), p. 29, and Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture 1500-1900*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988, first published in 1981), p. 321. Stothard became known as the "English Raphael" he considered Raphael as the "master of historical composition in its simplest, noblest, sweetest class" and often recommended a work called *Raphael's Bible* a collection after Raphael's "Loggia", a copy of which was in Stothard's possession at his death. See Shelley M. Bennet, *Thomas Stothard: The Mechanisms of Art patronage in England c.1800* (Columbia, Missouri, 1988), p. 81.

³⁸ The accompanying chariot attribute for *Galatea* was always the dolphin. For *Venus*, it was the swan. See Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, p. 64, 310.

³⁹ See "A Description of the Gold Coast of Guinea", in *The World Displayed; or, a Curious Collection of Voyages and Travels, Selected from the Writers of All Nations*. With an Introduction by Samuel Johnson. 20 vols, (London: J. Newberry, 1759-61), vol 17, Ch. 1. Writers in the mid to late C18th observed a hierarchy in dress and material possessions among the various castes of West coast Africans. Valuable possessions of intrinsic worth were: ivory, gold, coral, ostrich feathers and different dyed cloths, armbands and headresses.

⁴⁰ Martin Postle, "The Artist's Model from Reynolds to Eddy", in *The Artist's Model, Its Role in British Art from Lely to Eddy* by Illaria Bignamini and Martin Postle (University Art Galley, Nottingham and The Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood, 1991), p. 19. The female model presented high-minded artists at the Royal Academy with many problems including the lack of established precedents for the use of the female model in European academies (as opposed to the male model), allowing no theoretical grounds for instruction. Generally, in England, female models were regarded with suspicion or curiosity, perhaps because some of them were prostitutes, *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴¹ J. Michael Dash, *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998), p. 24.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

⁴³ Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (1982), p. 25.

⁴⁴ For more on "miscegenation" in early British colonization see the *DNB*, vol. 20 (Oxford University Press, 1950), pp. 859-861.

⁴⁵ For the sexual exploitation of black slaves see Douglas Hall, *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-86* Warwick University Caribbean Studies (London & Basingstoke: MacMillan Publishers, 1989).

⁴⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, "Life at the Border: Hybrid Identities of the Present", *New Perspectives Quarterly* (Winter, 1997), pp. 30-31.

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