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PARLIAMENTARY REPORTAGE AND THE
ABOLITION SPEECH OF 1789**

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WILLIAM WILBERFORCE'S SENTIMENTAL
RHETORIC: PARLIAMENTARY REPORTAGE
AND THE ABOLITION SPEECH OF 1789

BRYCCHAN CAREY

On Tuesday, 12 May 1789, William Wilberforce rose before the British House of Commons and delivered a speech, calling for abolition of the slave trade, which was widely reported, reprinted, and circulated in accounts that differed markedly in emphasis, and which in many cases are flatly contradictory. This article examines a small number of these conflicting accounts, and argues that surviving reports of Wilberforce's speech were strongly influenced by sentimentalism, or sensibility, the predominant literary discourse of the 1780s. This is of more than passing significance, as anti-slavery writers and speakers addressed an audience which was experienced in the discourse of sensibility, and which not only found itself capable of being moved by sentimental writing, but which demanded to be so moved. We can thus discern a sentimental rhetoric, emerging from the space between sentimental literature and political discourse. The relationship between sensibility and politics has not always been recognized. Only in recent years have literary scholars challenged the prevalent view of the early twentieth century in which sensibility was merely a self-indulgent fad, far removed from the "rise" of "serious" literature, or from the unfolding of weighty developments in politics and philosophy. Instead, critics such as John Mullan, Chris Jones, and Markman Ellis have argued that the discourse of sensibility was central to eighteenth-century thought and society, and was both grounded in the moral sense philosophy of Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith, and mobilized to lend support for a number of social and political projects.¹ These analyses are persuasive, but most seek to unearth the political and philosophical content of sentimental novels, poems, and plays. This article reverses the approach, and discusses the sentimental content of reports of an avowedly political event: a speech made before the British Parliament.

The speech itself is extremely significant. Calls for the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade were made with increasing frequency in the late 1780s, and it was clear to the supporters of the recently formed Abolition Society that the existence of the British slave trade depended, in the final analysis, on the support of Parliament. Accordingly, the focus of the abolition campaign was on persuading Parliament to declare the trade illegal. Central to this campaign was William Wilberforce, the Yorkshire MP and close friend of the Prime Minister, William Pitt. Wilberforce, who as MP for England's largest county had plenty of political influence, was nonetheless considered too inexperienced to join Pitt's cabinet. He was well known for his idealism, however, and for this reason was courted by the fledgling abolition committee and finally urged by the Prime Minister to steer abolition through the Commons. He began the task late in 1787, and by May 1789 had amassed enough evidence to present the speech examined here.² This speech, long trailed and eagerly awaited, was one of the most significant moments in the history of the abolition movement. It was reproduced in many forms and in many places. However, since most of these are now relatively inaccessible, this article includes an appendix providing generous extracts from the two major variants under discussion.

Reading accounts of the speech confronts us with a problem that reveals 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. Eighteenth-century political reporters deliberately changed things. Indeed, many saw themselves as literary figures who rendered into fine style the unpolished debates which they heard, a practice which has obscured the language of parliamentary debate for the modern historian or critic. For this reason, the first part of this article will consider the conditions of publication of parliamentary speeches in the late eighteenth century. Another problem is that it is not clear whether Wilberforce was a critic of sentimentalism or, quite the reverse, a fully developed sentimental writer. Reports of his speeches do little to confirm what his personal views on the subject were, so briefly considered here is a religious tract, written during the 1790s, from which we can glean much about Wilberforce's relationship with the discourse of sensibility. The main part of this article, however, considers Wilberforce's speech of 1789 as it appeared in contemporary periodicals and newspapers. It contrasts the accounts provided in these publications to show both the impossibility of recreating the exact words spoken in Parliament and, paradoxically, the possibility of establishing the tone of the speech without regard to its content. Bearing in mind throughout that the newspaper reader of the 1780s was almost certainly thoroughly experienced in the discourse of sensibility, this article argues that Wilberforce's sentimental rhetoric, although discernible in his original speech, was enhanced and manipulated

by the newspapers for rhetorical purposes often far removed from those of the speech which they purported to report.

PARLIAMENT AND THE NEWSPAPERS

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?"³ Those "romancers" were the early reporters of parliamentary debates during the eighteenth century, writing at first in defiance of the law and, after 1771, with Parliament's permission, though not under Parliament's control. Indeed, 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. This law was flouted on a number of occasions, most famously during the 1730s and '40s by Samuel Johnson in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, but in the main, detailed accounts of parliamentary debates were rarely available to the public. The Middlesex elections of 1768-69, in which John Wilkes was repeatedly elected to Parliament and then expelled, led to a considerable upsurge in public interest in 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 sketches of parliamentary debates. By the autumn of that year, many of the daily, weekly, and tri-weekly newspapers were publishing full reports as well. What followed was the celebrated "Printers Case" of 1771 in which the newspapers, by refusing *en masse* to obey the standing orders, secured the right to publish accounts of the debates in the Commons and, later, in the Lords.⁴

These newly legitimized 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 apologize for a gap in their coverage due to the Members' inaudibility. To make matters worse, notes were taken longhand: it was not until the second decade of the nineteenth century that shorthand was adopted. 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 con-

straints 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.⁵

Reports of debates were unreliable, but equally unreliable is the attempt to assess the exact tastes, social position, and political orientation of the readership of any particular eighteenth-century newspaper. Editorial comment was usually non-existent, and so any information about readers has to be inferred from the advertisements and from editorial choices of what was considered newsworthy. A preponderance of advertisements for luxury goods may suggest an up-market readership, for example, but might also indicate an aspirational readership of petty merchants. A great deal of interest in farming news might suggest a lower-status yeoman readership—or indicate that the paper was read by the land-owning aristocracy. Likewise, political affiliation is not always clear. Many newspapers were funded by the government or the opposition, but many more managed an independent existence. Of the newspapers considered in this article only two, *The World* and *The Whitehall Evening Post*, received government money, paid from the secret service fund (Aspinall, *Politics and the Press*, p. 68). Even this fact tells us little about the readership, who could not have known about (even if they guessed at) the government's support. Despite these difficulties, we can assume that accounts of debates were intended to be read by all who took an interest in politics, including MPs themselves. Since debates were often very badly attended, editors of newspapers and periodicals in the late eighteenth century could assume that their accounts would be read and used by both lawmakers and the public at large. Yet despite this broad readership, politicians were frequently 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. Wilberforce complained on a number of occasions that his speeches had been badly reported. His first biographers, his sons, recount that in December 1798 he raised the matter in Parliament and, five years later, he made his frustration 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."⁶

Modern historians have also had problems getting an accurate idea of parliamentary debates, a point explored by Dror Wahrman in his important essay of 1992, "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 debates. He notes that, in many cases, newspapers and periodicals offer contradictory reports of speeches given by the same Member of Parliament. Arguing that "representations of the proceedings of the British parliament in the press were in fact distinct reconstructions," arising from political and rhetorical habits peculiar to each newspaper, he notes that there was therefore no unified—or authorized—image of parliamentary debates available for each reader.⁷ This is important since historians and critics have come to accept Cobbett's *Parliamentary History* as a reliable text—or even, as he puts it, as a "semi-official" account.⁸ This approach might be good enough for simple enquiries, he suggests, but it is not sufficient for studying "charged and contested notions," where both the facts and the rhetoric can change dramatically in different accounts of the same speech (pp. 90-91). Issuing a call to historians to change their methodology, he also makes a far more interesting observation, from the point of view of the literary critic. It is not often that we get the opportunity to see the same rhetorical event from so many different angles. Rather than merely using this to attempt a reconstruction of what was actually said, a useful, if rather dull enterprise, Wahrman argues that we are offered a unique insight into the working of rhetoric in the period and that "we can gain insights into the active interaction of ideas and language, as it was played out in the daily practice of politics" (pp. 108-109). Wahrman's invitation does not yet appear to have been widely accepted, but his approach is an intriguing and potentially fruitful one, one that will be adopted in this article.

WILBERFORCE AND SENTIMENTALISM

The broadness, and the variety, of the competing reports makes it difficult, if not impossible, to pin down Wilberforce's precise language in his speech of May 1789. While some versions depict him in the full flow of sentimental rhetoric, others suggest that he took a more detached approach. It is impossible definitively to state whether sentimental rhetoric formed part of this speech, but examination of his other writings, especially those produced under conditions of full authorial control, offers a promising way of revealing Wilberforce's views on sentimentalism. From this we can at least establish whether reports of his speech are in character. Wilberforce published four books during his lifetime. Of these, only *A Practical view of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians* is close enough, chronologically, to the speech examined here for us to make any meaningful comparisons.⁹ Wilberforce had started the work in 1793 as "a little tract to give to his friends," many of whom were puzzled about the nature of his conversion to evangelical Christianity (Pollock, p. 145). 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. For our purposes, the *Practical View* shows two

things: first, that Wilberforce had a sustained, if troubled, relationship with the discourse of sensibility; second, that he recognized the power of sympathy and the “feeling heart,” viewing them as requirements of the true Christian.

Wilberforce’s difficulty with sensibility is illustrated by a section of his book attacking “Exquisite Sensibility—the school of Rousseau and Sterne.” Rousseau is hardly discussed, but Sterne, who displays “a morbid sensibility in the perception of indecency,” comes in for fierce criticism. The followers of Sterne and Rousseau, Wilberforce claims, are “apt to be puffed up with a proud though secret consciousness of their own superior acuteness and sensibility.” Exquisite sensibilities, “though shewy and apt to catch the eye . . . are of a flimsy and perishable fabric” (Wilberforce, *Practical View*, pp. 282-84). These criticisms of sensibility were all too familiar in the late 1790s, and Wilberforce adds little to the debate. A few pages earlier, however, he had combined an attack on sentiment with a restatement of the Protestant doctrine of faith above works: “It seems to be an opinion pretty generally prevalent,” he argued, “that kindness and sweetness of temper, sympathising, and benevolent, and generous affections . . . may well be allowed in our imperfect state, to make up for the defect of what in strict propriety of speech is termed Religion” (p. 247). In these, Wilberforce attacks sentiment, especially false sentiment, by deeming it self-centered, self-serving, and irreligious. While Wilberforce clearly opposes “flimsy and perishable” sentiment, however, the same does not appear to be true of more deep-seated sensibility. In an eighteen-page section in the book called “On the Admission of the Passions into Religion,” he argues that

We can scarcely indeed look into any part of the sacred volume without meeting abundant proofs, that it is the religion of the Affections 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.¹⁰

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 feminized language not present in the Authorized Version. Where Ezekiel represents God as 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 “warmer and more tender nature” to avoid the more explicit “flesh.” Similarly, Wilberforce introduces the 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." With these respectable circumlocutions, the Biblical texts have been domesticated and sentimentalized. At the same time, the readings and their interpretations deal with God's requirement that people feel and feel passionately.

Earlier in the book, Wilberforce considers the idea of sympathy and postulates that it is an essential tool of Christian forgiveness—a rather present-minded exercise, as the word is not mentioned once in the Authorized Version of the Bible. 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. (*Practical View*, pp. 51-52)

Wilberforce's language is again softening, domesticating, and feminizing. Rather than the fulmination so often associated with the evangelical preacher, we have keywords of sentimental humanitarianism: "kindness," "pity," and "tender concern." Most interesting, however, is Wilberforce's ability to bring in a very eighteenth-century interest in sympathy and to bend it to serve the needs of his religion. Rather than cast out sinfulness as an abomination, we are encouraged to view it as a disease, and a universal one at that. It is clear that Wilberforce, despite making jibes against David Hume and Adam Smith, was strongly influenced by the eighteenth-century philosophical school that saw sympathy as the paramount force in human relationships (pp. 387-88). It is not inconceivable, therefore, that *The Parliamentary History* quotes him accurately when it reports that 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."¹¹

THE 1789 ABOLITION SPEECH

This observation was reportedly made during Wilberforce's speech of 12 May 1789, which called for the abolition of the slave trade. His strategy, it would seem, was to appeal both to the heads and the hearts of the assembled parliamentarians. As we do not have access to the speech itself, it is hard to judge if he was successful in this. However, we can glean much from the newspapers. One such, *The General Evening Post*, supplemented its coverage

of the debate with a back-page description of the delivery of the speech, one of the few contemporary descriptions we have. According to the newspaper:

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.¹²

Despite this upbeat account of its delivery, the newspaper's version of the actual speech is a frustrating one, carefully omitting all of the "pathetic" and most of the "argumentative" sections in favor of a rather harsh representation emphasizing the offending "calculations" (by which the newspaper means statistical evidence). This account does Wilberforce and his cause no favors. It leaves the reader unmoved by the (absent) emotional parts and unimpressed by what remains: intellectual arguments that are not always watertight even when they are broadly persuasive. Several newspapers employed this strategy, which allowed them to be superficially respectful to Wilberforce while rubbishing abolition. Of those that took this path, only *The General Evening Post* could make any sort of a claim to impartiality, as it was the only newspaper to supplement its report with a statement claiming that the pathetic and eloquent parts contributed to making this "one of the best speeches ever delivered in Parliament." It is not a claim supported by its synopsis of his speech.¹³

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 if the ablest and most eloquent speeches that was ever heard in that or any other place" (R. I. & S. Wilberforce, I, 220). Their view of their father's 1789 speech is understandably sympathetic and, interestingly, the sections they choose to discuss and to reproduce in part are among the most sentimental. They note that his "arguments were invested throughout with the glow of genuine humanity, and enforced by the power of a singular eloquence." Lamenting the "barrenness of an extract from 'a most inaccurate Report'" (a report which they do not identify), they nonetheless argue that Wilberforce's arguments "retain much of their original beauty." They conclude that

Knowing "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." (I, 218-19)

Despite the "barrenness" of the account they are using, the Wilberforces, at a distance of fifty years, have been especially moved by one short passage which, in emotional terms, discusses sympathy, suffering, and death. This section, in which Wilberforce discusses "the sufferings of the middle passage," appears to have been a highly ornate piece of oratory, displaying complex rhetorical figures and arguments. In particular, it seems to have been a sustained piece of pathos designed to catch at the hearts of the listener. Accordingly, the rest of this article will be an analysis of this section of the speech as it was reported in two very different publications. These, Cobbett's *Parliamentary History* and the daily newspaper *The Morning Star* (both substantially reproduced in the appendix) were selected as representing the main types of parliamentary reporting of the period. *The Parliamentary History* was included because it has traditionally been seen as reliable. Historians frequently quote from it uncritically, as if it were the best or even the only source for eighteenth-century parliamentary speeches. While this is not true, Cobbett's accounts are nonetheless useful because they were collated by reference from a number of different sources and because he 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" (*Parliamentary History*, I, Preface). So, while Cobbett's accounts are far from perfect, they can usefully be employed as a starting point against which to measure other interpretations of the same speech. In this instance, the extract does double work. Cobbett very largely based his account on that in John Almon's *Parliamentary Register*, one of the parliamentary periodicals that published polished versions of speeches weeks or months after they had been delivered.¹⁴ The second version of the speech was published in the daily newspaper *The Morning Star*. This appeared just a few hours after Wilberforce had finished speaking, and in places the text is clearly hurried. It is in many ways typical of a contemporary parliamentary report, but has been included in preference to other newspaper reports since it sustains the sentimental approach more fully than most.

About one third of the way in to *The Parliamentary History's* account of the speech, Wilberforce begins to discuss the middle passage (col. 45). In Cobbett's version, Wilberforce starts by contrasting his own feelings with the "blunted" feelings of the slave traders, thus setting up a dichotomy between the man of sensibility and the man of insensibility. In this context, Cobbett

shows Wilberforce examining the evidence given by a Mr. Norris, who was one of the Liverpool slave traders who had given evidence in support of the trade. The examination commences with a seemingly impartial review of Norris's evidence, but this is given only to allow Norris to incriminate himself. The case seems to hinge on the word "promoted." Norris, in this account, had said that "the song and dance are promoted." Wilberforce is represented as exposing the true meaning of the word "promoted," showing that "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." In this version of the speech, Wilberforce's approach is sensationalist, but one mixing sensation with irony. We find out that Norris's use of the word "promoted" is euphemistic. While promotion usually implies some sort of freedom of choice, Norris's slaves are violently coerced. A strong contrast is drawn between the image favored by the slave traders, and the reality of the middle passage. Norris's alleged 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. 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 dance for themselves, but are "danced" by another, bringing to mind macabre imagery of puppeteers pulling the strings of their helpless captives. Here, though, the strings are the cords of the cat o'nine tails. "Such," indeed, "is the meaning of the word promoted." The reader may want to pause here, to digest the full horror of the words just passed, but instead is hurried on to a further horrifying thought: the slaves must sometimes be force-fed. Earlier in Cobbett's account, Wilberforce had been depicted as quoting 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." Hyperbole such as "the best sauces" is clearly such nonsense that it is not necessary to refute it directly. Yet whether this ironic strategy can be attributed to Wilberforce or to the reporter, this horrific and darkly ironic passage 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.

The passage alludes to Psalm 137, "By the rivers of Babylon," where "they that carried us away captive required of us a song." Its relationship with the psalm is complex, inverting the role of song in the biblical text, but the story

retains the form of biblical story-telling while adding a specifically eighteenth-century concern with role of feeling. We can describe the passage as a sentimental parable: the "parable of the captain." In this, 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 of this bitterly ironic story engages the readers' sensibilities and enables them to distance themselves 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 reader, who might congratulate him- or herself on having interpreted the ironic jibe at the captain's humanity, and on having finer and more honest feelings than the captain. The reader, then, is both alerted to suffering and, through flattery, made more receptive to the argument. This is also a story, however, 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 this version of the speech (col. 42) 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. The suggestion is that there are two types of members: those who admit this guilt and those who do not. In this "parable of the captain," these two groups are implicitly characterized 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 reader, the passage moves on to evidence. The rhetorical progression from ridicule, through horror, sentiment, and irony abruptly reaches death, a word which is structurally highlighted in Cobbett's account, quite possibly reflecting the emphasis Wilberforce gave it during the delivery of his speech. The introduction of death marks a turning point, a moment when the rhetoric 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, is new evidence introduced. There is a 12½ percent mortality rate on slave ships. Then we get the statistic that 4½ percent of slaves die waiting to be sold. Worse is to come: another third of the slaves die during the seasoning period. Although these truly appalling statistics by themselves should have been enough to convince any parliamentarian to vote to abolish the slave trade, they were not enough. Parliament took another eighteen years to abolish the trade and, on the evidence of Cobbett's account, it would appear that Wilberforce was aware of the limitations of hard evidence in the parliamentary forum. This 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 the start of Cobbett's account of his speech, we read that Wilberforce had given his audience an undertaking not to enter into the subject "with any sort of passion" and "not to take them by surprise" (col. 42). Whether or not this account represents Wilberforce's actual words, the version Cobbett gives us is not marked for its use of "cool and impartial reason." Nor does it refrain from taking its audience by surprise. Indeed, the preamble to the mortality statistics is particularly full of emotional language, both impassioned and sentimental, horrific imagery, and surprising revelations and figures of speech. Rather than present the statistics in a reasoned and impartial manner, which allows for a detached response, this passage 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, it makes use of fashionable sentimental language ("tears" and "lamentation") to present a sentimental parable on the difference between true and false sensibility. By now, having forced the reader to examine his or her own sensibility, the passage abruptly apostrophizes Death, thus taking the reader by surprise. In the hope of having maneuvered the reader into an emotional state by these methods, the passage now forces the reader to accept the empirical part of its argument on emotional terms. Either they have true sensibility and will thus 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 ideals of the day. The passage, couched in the language of sensibility, thus demands introspection. If it in any way reflects the reality of Wilberforce's delivery, one imagines that even the most hardened supporters of slavery then present in the House of Commons remained suspiciously quiet through this part of Wilberforce's speech. Indeed, *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."¹⁵ 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 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 we have just explored was reported in many forms. One account, differing markedly from that in Cobbett's *Parliamentary History*, appeared in *The*

Morning Star on the morning after the speech was delivered. It is shorter than Cobbett's account, 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), and commences with Wilberforce magnanimously declaring that "he came not to accuse the merchants, but to appeal to their feelings and humanity." He then declares that the slave trade "must make every man of feeling shudder." This appeal to that quintessentially sentimental figure, the man of feeling, precedes what is probably the most sentimental account of the speech we have.

The account differs from Cobbett's in many ways. A short introduction aside, the Cobbett account is in the first person, no doubt one of the reasons why historians have found it so plausible. *The Morning Star's* version is less direct, starting in the descriptive third person, and the voice of the reporter obtrudes into it more clearly with locutions such as "Mr. Wilberforce then noticed." In places, such as when we hear that Wilberforce "resolved to be regulated by temper and coolness," we can see how the reporter is merely giving the flavor of the speech without revealing its ingredients. Yet the structure of the speech is broadly similar in both accounts, and there are many phrases common to both. Interestingly, however, in the passage which I call "the parable of the captain," the two accounts manage to disagree sharply 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 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 songs of lamentation upon their departure which, while they sing, are always in tears, | 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. |
| 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. First, they are conditional on the "facts" which Wilberforce relates becoming publicly known. Second, they are shed by English men and women 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 characterizes the sentimental response to others' suffering as agreeable, and it provides a mechanism—sympathy—by which the agreeable sentiments are communicated.

At this point, *The Morning Star's* report resembles Cobbett's only as far as they both mention tears and are conducted in sentimental language. The second section sees the newspaper report the "parable of the captain." Here, though, the story is entirely different in that we are told 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 characterizing 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 for his "sensations." To this reporter, the captain's feelings appear to be more important than his actions, an inversion of the Cobbett variant in which Wilberforce attacks the captain for intensifying his actions to palliate his own feelings. Indeed, the reporter appears to have been carried away with the emotion of the speech, or at least his own interpretation of it, since at the end of the "parable of the captain" the third-person narration abruptly gives way to a first person account. The reporter's voice merges with Wilberforce's in the phrase "when first I heard, Sir, of these iniquities," a phrase that seeks to mask the mediating influence of the reporter and present the reconstructed report as the actual words of Wilberforce. It is, of course, significant that this rhetorical trick comes at the end of the most moving part of the report, the "parable of the captain," and immediately after the surprising and emotionally charged passage which concludes with the heavily emphasized reference to "DEATH."

Despite this, the main difference between the two reports lies in *The Morning Star's* lack of an ironic strategy to attack the captain. It is possible that the reporter merely failed to catch the irony which Cobbett's reporter

recognized, 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 the "parable of the captain" 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 [Wilberforce] loved the fellow for doing, as it shewed that his feelings had not been thoroughly subdued, even by the inhumanity of his barbarous occupation.¹⁶

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 sentimentalized. They are treated not as feeling human subjects, suffering as the reader would suffer, but rather as sentimental objects, blank canvases with tears, responding to their own aesthetic productions as much as to the dreadful situation into which they had been forced. This aesthetic sensibility was an aspect of the scene *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.¹⁷

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 the many readers of sentimental novels, plays, and poetry, a constituency which the newspapers—and the government of the day—could only have benefited from attracting.

The latter point may explain both the sentimental tone of these passages, and the rather inconsistent approach to the slavery debate taken by *The World* and *The Whitehall Evening Post*. The two titles tended to maintain a neutral or mildly abolitionist position. At the same time, they both showed a distinct predilection for a sentimental tone of reportage, coupled with a fondness for publishing sentimental poetry. In *The Whitehall Evening Post*, these tendencies come together with the publication of a number of sentimental anti-slavery poems, most notably those by William Cowper.¹⁸ Both newspapers, however, published strongly pro-slavery letters in the days leading up to Wilberforce's speech.¹⁹ The reason for this sudden intervention seems, circumstantially at least, to be clear. Both newspapers were in the pay

of the government. While the Prime Minister supported abolition, at least in private, the same was not true of all of his cabinet. Although the government was split on the abolition question, its Chief Secretary to the Treasury, George Rose, appears to have had firmer opinions on the question. Not only was he a slave-owner who derived almost all his income from his estates in Antigua, but he was also the man who paid the newspapers and, to some extent, told them what to publish. Rose almost certainly either wrote or commissioned the pro-slavery letters.²⁰ By contrast, on 6 May, the day when *The World* published its pro-slavery letter, the normally abolitionist *Morning Star* published a strong attack on George Rose.

The sentimental tone was arguably a populist one as well. It is a moot point how many Members of Parliament would have avowed themselves avid consumers of sentimental literature. Indeed, many would have considered such productions, especially sentimental novels, beneath their dignity. The same was not necessarily true of ordinary readers of daily and weekly newspapers. These publications competed in a marketplace that included not only other newspapers and monthly magazines, but also works of fiction, sentimental and otherwise. It is tempting to speculate that, as part of his propagandist policy, Rose urged the papers to put the government's case in language that would attract a broad audience. He may well have had this strategy in mind when it came to the slave trade as well. Whether or not this was the case, it remains significant that the two most sentimental accounts of the Wilberforce speech considered here appeared in newspapers that were funded by the government. Although a consistent government line on the slavery question is hard to pin down, it is nonetheless relevant that the popular sentimental tone is adopted most clearly (or perhaps most clumsily) in those newspapers with a positive, if covert, propagandist purpose. However, the commercial imperative was likely to have been equally important. On discovering a section of Wilberforce's speech which could have remotely been described as sentimental, it would have done the newspapers no harm to reconstruct the speech in a way which more closely allied it with the fashionable discourse.

By contrast, Cobbett largely based his account on the one provided by *The Parliamentary Register*, 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 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 may) 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 Cobbett's 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 about 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. According to the newspaper, Wilberforce told Members of Parliament that "we unite with the person of sensibility, that [abolition] is necessary, as founded in rectitude and universal benevolence." This 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. Nonetheless, the section concludes with words similar to those reported by Cobbett, who had noted Wilberforce, with more than a nod to the sentimental philosophers, saying 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." *The Morning Star* found it necessary to stress with italics 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, though firmly based in moral sense philosophy, 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, although not his sentimental tone, are played down or ignored entirely in publications that advertised a belief in the continuation of the trade in slaves.

APPENDIX

1. From "Debate on Mr. Wilberforce's Resolutions respecting the Slave Trade" in William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England: From the Norman Conquest in 1066 to the Year 1803*, 36 vols. (London: T. Curson Hansard, 1806-20), 28 (1789-91), cols 42-68.

[Cols 41-42]

Mr. Wilberforce now rose 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. But when I reflect, however, on the encouragement which I have had, through the whole course of a long and laborious examination of this question, and how much candour I have experienced, and how conviction has increased within my own mind, in proportion as I have advanced in my labours;—when I reflect, especially, that however averse any gentleman may now be, yet we shall all be of one opinion in the end;—when I turn myself to these thoughts, I take courage—I determine to forget all my other fears, and I march forward with a firmer step in the full assurance that my cause will bear me out, and that I shall be able to justify upon the clearest principles, every resolution in my hand, the avowed end of which is, the total abolition of the slave trade. 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. 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.

[Cols 45-48]

Having now disposed of the first part of this subject, I must speak of the transit of the slaves in the West Indies. This I confess, in my own opinion, is the most wretched part of the whole subject. So much misery condensed in so little room, is more than the human imagination had ever before conceived. I will not accuse the Liverpool merchants: I will allow them, nay, I will believe them to be men of humanity; and I will therefore believe, if it were not for the enormous magnitude and extent of the evil which distracts their attention from individual cases, and makes them think generally, and therefore less feelingly on the subject, they would never have persisted in the trade. I verily believe therefore, if the wretchedness of any one of the many hundred Negroes stowed in each ship could be brought before

their view, and remain within the sight of the African Merchant, that there is no one among them whose heart would bear it. Let any one imagine to himself 6 or 700 of these wretches chained two and two, surrounded with every object that is nauseous and disgusting, diseased, and struggling under every kind of wretchedness! How can we bear to think of such a scene as this? One would think it had been determined to heap upon them all the varieties of bodily pain, for the purpose of blunting the feelings of the mind; and yet, in this very point (to show the power of human prejudice) the situation of the slaves has been described by Mr. Norris, one of the Liverpool delegates, in a manner which, I am sure will convince the House how interest can draw a film across the eyes, so thick, that total blindness could do no more; and how it is our duty therefore to trust not to the reasonings of interested men, or to their way of colouring a transaction. "Their apartments," says Mr. Norris, "are fitted up as much for their advantage as circumstances will admit. The right angle of one, indeed is connected with the left angle of another by a small iron fetter, and if they are turbulent, by another on their wrists. They 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. After breakfast they have water to wash themselves, while their apartments are perfumed with frankincense and lime-juice. Before dinner, they are amused after the manner of their country. The song and dance are promoted," and, as if the whole was really a scene of pleasure and dissipation it is added, that games of chance are furnished. "The men play and sing, while the women and girls make fanciful ornaments with beads, which they are plentifully supplied with." Such is the sort of strain in which the Liverpool delegates, and particularly Mr. Norris, gave evidence before the privy council. What will the House think when, by the concurring testimony of other witnesses, the true history is laid open. The slaves who are sometimes described as rejoicing at their captivity, are so wrung with misery at leaving their country, that it is the constant practice to set sail at night, lest they should be sensible of their departure. The pulse which Mr. Norris talks of are horse beans; and the scantiness, both of water and provision, was suggested by the very legislature of Jamaica in the report of their committee, to be a subject that called for the interference of parliament. Mr. Norris talks of frankincense and lime juice; when surgeons tell you the slaves are stowed so close, that there is not room to tread among them: and when you have it in evidence from sir George Yonge, that even in a ship which wanted 200 of her complement, the stench was intolerable. 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. 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. 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. The diseases, however, which they contract on shipboard, the astringent washes which are to hide their wounds, and the mischievous tricks used to make them up for sale, are, as the Jamaica report says, (a most precious and valuable report, which I shall often have to advert to) one principle cause of this mortality. Upon the whole, however, here is a mortality of about 50 per cent. and this among negroes who are not bought unless (as the phrase is with cattle) they are sound in wind and limb. How then can the House refuse its belief to the multiplied testimonies before the privy council, of the savage treatment of the negroes in the middle passage? Nay, indeed, what need is there of any evidence? The number of deaths speaks for itself, and makes all such enquiry superfluous. As soon as ever I had arrived thus far in my investigation of the slave trade, I confess to you sir, so enormous so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for the abolition. A trade founded in iniquity, and carried on as this was, must be abolished, let the policy be what it might,—let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest till I had effected its abolition.

2. From *The Morning Star*, 78 (Wednesday, 13 May 1789).

Mr. WILBERFORCE then called the attention of the House to what he was about to propose. He said that he rose with a confession of what operated in his mind relative to the abolition of the Slave Trade. When I consider, says he, how long this has been suggested by many, and of what importance it is to a race of men, possessing qualities equally commendable with our own—how many millions are at present involved in the decision of the question—it is impossible for me to object in being instrumental to the business. He then remarked, that he was convinced, whatever should be the decision, that in bringing forward the discussion, he performed nothing more than his duty; and he was so fully persuaded of the rectitude of his conduct, that no consideration whatever would make him swerve from his honour so far, as to dissuade him from marching boldly forward on the occasion. It was no party question, and he flattered himself that the voice of reason and truth would be heard. He was resolved to be regulated by temper and coolness, and challenged a fair discussion.—It was not a proposition grounded upon particular motives of policy, but founded in principles of philanthropy. It was no idle expedient or speculation of the moment, but derived from the most mature deliberation. He came not to accuse the Merchants, but to appeal to their feelings and humanity. He

confessed, that in the weak state of health in which he now appeared, and precarious as it might seem to many, he would stand against every personal idea, and bear the burthen destined for a person who stood in his situation. The subject had already undergone many discussions, and he apprehended that previous to a final decision, it would undergo many more. What must make every man of feeling shudder was, that, after examining the annals of Africa, numbers had been carried every year from their native country, in order to satiate the avarice of a certain description of men whose whole thoughts were bent upon tyranny and oppression.

...

Mr. Wilberforce then noticed that he had carefully examined the histories of the West Indies, and had attended to the times, when forgetting every idea of humanity, they were torn from the protection of their friends. To delude them particularly from their native country, they generally set sail from Africa in the night time, and thus evaded reflections, which might be roused concerning their friends and relations ashore. This was a dreadful expedient; and till now, he could not believe that so much *misery* could be *condensed* in so *little room*. He could wish to rouse the feelings of every man on the occasion, and convince the people that their intention and aid were the result of consideration, which did awaken him. With regard to the gentlemen of Liverpool, he could do them the justice to believe, that they would not seriously interrupt the abolition of the Slave Trade, especially when they understood that the characters of the people of this country were sullied by the outrages alluded to. Nothing, certainly, could excite them sooner to an acquiescence, than the sight of 600 linked two and two; consequently to hear the gentlemen of Liverpool affirm, that the situation of these poor unhappy mortals, was comfortable, rather appeared strange and ridiculous. He then adverted to what had been adduced by Mr. Norris, in his evidence, who had made a comparison between an African Monarch, and an European, and declared that what was called a Palace, was nothing more than a *house of mud*, where, however, every attention was made for that tenor of tranquillity which was so very desirable.—The manner of treating negroes, during a long voyage, was to the following effect:—the space between the decks is appointed entirely for their lodging; every attention is paid to keep that as clean as possible; the negroes are kept on deck all day, if the weather be fine; they are fed with two meals of comfortable victuals; they are supplied with the luxuries of pipe and tobacco, and a dram occasionally, when the coldness of the weather requires it; they are supplied with the musical instruments of their country; they are encouraged to be cheerful, to sing and to dance, and they do both; the women are supplied with beads to ornament themselves; they are kept clean shaved; and every attention paid to their heads that there be no vermin lodged there; they are secured with fetters on their legs, two and two together; and if a turbulent disposition appears, with another on the wrist; their apartments are clean washed, and fumigated with the fumes of tar and frankincense, and sprinkled with vinegar, &c. As an extenuation of the crimes laid to the charge of the Agents for the Merchants, who are accustomed to this traffic, it has been mentioned with some degree of triumph, that they were treated on board with all manner of luxurious indulgence. The *luxury* alluded to was this—the *song* and the *dance* were promoted; the women were employed in weaving ornaments for the hair, and the utmost attention was observed to *keep up* their

spirits. The truth of this observation was evidently the very reverse, and if it were possible to cast a *film* over the *eyes* of *mankind*, so as to deprive them of sight by a *total blindness*, the prevaricating mode of mentioning the transactions, could not be depicted in a more absurd point of view. The poor wretches were in such a deplorable state and unparalleled torment, and suffering such torture, that the surgeon who visited them, when bound two and two, could not pass without having his legs bitten by the slaves. Sir George Yonge affirms, that the stench was so intolerable as to be past all sufferance; and that in the article of water there was a miserable allowance. 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 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. When first I heard, Sir, of these iniquities, I considered them as exaggerations, and could not believe it possible, that men had determined to live by exerting themselves for the torture and misery of their fellow-creatures. I have taken great pains to make myself master of the subject, and can declare, that such scenes of barbarity are enough to rouse the indignation and horror of the most callous of mankind. Upon making an average of the loss sustained in the cargo of the *Guinea ships*, it appears, that one-eighth of the whole generally suffered. Upon examining the *Jamaica Report*, another essential loss was discovered, numbers died by the attempt of *seasoning* the slaves, that is, changing them from one climate to another—sometimes the loss appeared by death to be 4 1-half per cent.—at other times 17 per cent. the last of which calculation is generally admitted by the best writers. In every common cargo, it has been observed, that about 50 or 60 perish. From the windward coast about Sierra Leona, the general average of mortality was not found more than three per cent. From Bonny, the number of slaves was not recollected that died on the voyage. From Benin, nine were buried out of 300 in the course of three months. But the general average of mortality from Benin, Bonny, New Calabar, Old Calabar, Cameroon, and Gaboon, was much greater. That the slaves are subject to the following disorders: the small pox, measles, dysentery, fluxes, and fevers. They are rendered more sickly by laying up in land rivers. They generally lie longer on the coast than a slave ship does. An epidemical disorder on the coast prevails sometimes to a very great degree.—Mr. Jones had a ship, in which a fever broke out before she had purchased twenty slaves. This distemper carried off a great number of the crew in the course of a month. From every consideration I shall deal frankly with the House, by declaring, that no act of policy whatever will make me swerve from my duty and oblige me to abandon a measure which I think will be an honour to humanity. Mr. Wilberforce then mentioned, that he intended to submit to the consideration of the House, several resolutions, upon which a General Motion should be found for the TOTAL ABOLITION of the SLAVE TRADE. When, says he, I was persuaded of the frequent commission of the crimes

mentioned, I found myself impelled to go boldly forward; and had before I had time to reflect, proceeded so far that I could not recede; but had I deserted the great and important undertaking, I should have considered myself wanting in that necessary portion of duty which I owed to my constituents and to my country. There is no accusation made against the gentlemen of the West India trade; but, by bringing forward the consideration of such a mighty object, we unite with the person of sensibility, that the measure is necessary, as founded in rectitude and universal benevolence. The great cause, it has been stated, of mortality in the West Indies is, that the slaves are very profligate and dissolute in their manners; but the principal cause, however, is their ill treatment; for the agents *squeeze* as much as possible from their exertions. Here the Divine Doctrine is contradicted by the reverse action—That *sympathy is the great source of humanity*.

NOTES

1. John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Chris Jones, *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s* (London: Routledge, 1993); Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).
2. No entirely satisfactory biography of Wilberforce exists. The main source, written by his sons, Robert Isaac and Samuel Wilberforce, is *The Life of William Wilberforce*, 5 vols. (London: John Murray, 1838). The most recent is John Pollock, *William Wilberforce* (London: Constable, 1977), a work of popular biography.
3. Michael MacDonagh, *The Reporters' Gallery* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913), pp. 163-64.
4. 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.
5. Two useful studies are A. Aspinall, *Politics and the Press c. 1780-1850* (London: Home & Van Thal, 1949), and A. Aspinall, "The Reporting and Publishing of the House of Commons Debates 1771-1834," in A. J. P. Taylor and Richard Pares, eds., *Essays Presented to Sir Lewis Namier* (London: Macmillan, 1956), pp. 227-57. See also R. R. Rea, *The English Press in Politics, 1760-1774* (Lincoln: Univ. 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).
6. R. I. and S. Wilberforce, II, 323-24; III, 75.
7. Dror Wahrman, "Virtual Representation: Parliamentary Reporting and the Languages of Class in the 1790s," *Past and Present*, 136 (August 1992), 83-113, on p. 85.
8. William Cobbett produced *The Parliamentary History of England: From the Norman Conquest in 1066 to the Year 1803*, 36 vols. (London: T. Curson Hansard, 1806-20) as an independent commercial enterprise, compiling the debates from a variety of sources. However, the misconception that it is an official account is widespread and is even implied on the parliamentary Web site. See "House of Commons Debates—Hansard" at <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm/cmhansrd.htm>
In fact, it was not until 1908 that *Hansard* became the official, verbatim, record.
9. 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, 1797). It went through eighteen English editions between 1797 and 1830.
10. *Practical View*, pp. 84-85. The biblical texts 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" (Revelation 3:16).

11. *Parliamentary History*, 28 (1789-91), col. 49.
12. *General Evening Post* (Tuesday-Thursday, 12-14 May 1789).
13. This report, with others briefly discussed here but not reproduced in the appendix, is available in the Burney Collection of Newspapers at the British Library.
14. *The Parliamentary Register; or, History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Commons: Containing an Account of the Most Interesting Speeches and Motions; Accurate Copies of the Most Remarkable Letters and Papers; of the Most Material Evidence, Petitions, &c. Laid Before and Offered to the House*, 45 vols. (London, 1781-96), 26 (1789), 130-54.
15. *Star*, 323 (Thursday, 14 May 1789).
16. *The World*, 738 (Wednesday, 13 May 1789).
17. *Whitehall Evening Post*, 6551 (Tuesday-Thursday, 12-14 May 1789).
18. "The Negro's Complaint" appeared in issue 6564 (Thursday-Saturday, 11-13 June 1789); "The Morning Dream" in issue 6569 (Tuesday-Thursday, 23-25 June 1789).
19. *World*, 732 (Wednesday 6 May 1789); *Whitehall Evening Post*. 6546 (Thursday-Saturday, 30 April-2 May 1789).
20. Aspinall, pp. 72-73; *Dictionary of National Biography*.