GRÉGORY PIERROT

Droit du Seigneur, Slavery, and Nation in the Poetry of Edward Rushton

THE *WEST INDIAN ECLOGUES*, EDWARD RUSHTON'S FIRST MAJOR POEM, was published in 1787, one among a spate of other poems designed to rouse moral outrage at the Atlantic slave trade in the English public. Rushton's *Eclogues* are set in Jamaica and spoken by enslaved Africans taken from their native land. Rushton had personal knowledge of the subject: a former sailor in the slave trade, he "resided several years in the West-Indies," and claimed his poems to be "painted from actual observation."[1] After contracting ophthalmia while attending to the enslaved on a ship and becoming blind in the 1770s, Rushton spent the rest of his life as a journalist and writer advocating republican and abolitionist beliefs, and agitating for sailors' rights and Irish autonomy.[2] His *Eclogues* fit into late 1780s political and poetic trends, expressing abolitionist sentiment through the revived ancient form of the eclogue. They also echoed and significantly amplified a theme broached by the young poet: the revenge of the enslaved.

Revenge was an essential theme in early abolitionist poetry, yet it was generally treated indirectly, with varying levels of discomfort. Rushton's poem—in particular the fourth and final eclogue—stands out for its comparatively direct treatment of the topic of slave revenge, but also for the peculiar way in which it ties the theme specifically to the matter of enslaved women's sexual abuse at the hands of slave owners. Rushton would go on to evoke rape in "Briton, and Negro Slave" in his 1806 *Poems*, also from the point of view of the victims' husbands. On this theme, his poetry is connected to a complex network of racialized representations of rape in English, and more broadly, Western literature. Indeed, the late eighteenth century saw the development of a principally French continental literary trend that invoked *droit du seigneur* or *jus prima noctis*—the mythical aristo-

1. "Advertisement" in [Edward Rushton], *West-Indian Eclogues* (London: Lowndes, 1787).

2. On Rushton's life, see Franca Dellarosa, *Talking Revolution: Edward Rushton's Rebellious Poetics, 1782–1814* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 5–14.

1 LINE SHORT
REGULAR
1 LINE LONG

cratic privilege by which a lord could lay sexual claim on any new vassal bride on her wedding night—in order to challenge Ancien Régime social and political hierarchies. Rushton's treatment of rape in his poetry reveals that while much like French *droit du seigneur* literature it is rooted in a long tradition tying the violation of women to collective politics, it also expresses the deep unease with which even the most progressive European abolitionists considered the possibility of black agency in the New World. Black resistance was morally justified, but could a responsible white Briton support black revolution? Through Rushton's poetry, I will explore the ways in which abolitionists put literary faces on this conundrum, before they had to face it literally in the revolution in the French colony of Saint-Domingue in 1791.

Rushton's *West Indian Eclogues* owes much to Thomas Chatterton's introduction of the classical form to the abolitionist debate in his African Eclogues of 1770.[3] The form originated in Virgil's *Eclogues*, itself a dark elaboration on the Ancient Greek bucolic genre. Virgil's poem is "permeated through and through with portrayals of human infelicity, catastrophic loss, and emotional turbulence" reflecting the intense social and political turmoil of the last years of the Roman Republic.[4] Chatterton's African Eclogues emulate Virgil's somber musings, simultaneously operating a drastic shift in focus: whereas Virgil reflected on social upheaval internal to Rome, Chatterton portrays "the preying of civilization upon the innocent denizens of paradise."[5] Rushton's poems—especially the final one in this collection—in turn echo Chatterton's formally and thematically in their focus on people of African descent wronged by Europeans, though he transposes the action to a Caribbean locale. In evoking the desire for revenge on the part of the victims of European slave traders, the *West Indian Eclogues* particularly resonate with Chatterton's "Heccar and Gaira: An African Eclogue." Chatterton's African warriors are shown recovering from a bloody battle with European enslavers whom they did not manage to stop from abducting their kin, including Gaira's wife Cawna and their children.[6] His friend Heccar promises eternal war on the enslavers, yet the poem expresses ambivalence towards revenge. Gaira is unable to stop the ships that

3. See Brycchan Carey, "A Stronger Muse," in *Ancient Slavery and Abolition: From Hobbes to Hollywood*, eds. Edith Hall, Richard Alston, Justine McConnell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 125–52.

4. Gregson Davis, "Introduction," in *Virgil's Eclogues*, trans. Len Krisak (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), ix.

5. Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 96.

6. Thomas Chatterton, "Heccar and Gaira: An African Eclogue," *A Supplement to the Miscellanies of Thomas Chatterton* (London, 1784), 53–59. See also Dellarosa, *Talking Revolution*, 143–50.

have carried Cawna and his children away, and though he vows to "strew the beaches with the mighty dead," he admits that "With vengeance [he] shall be never satisfied."[7] Revenge is at the heart of the poem, yet it remains out of it: the warriors' vow never does, and never can, come to fruition.

English abolitionist poems after Chatterton increasingly summoned revenge but seldom showed it: Thomas Day and John Bicknell's *The Dying Negro* (1773) thus calls on God to "let revenge, let swift revenge be mine!" and destroy the ship, but later finds solace in interpreting a subsequent stroke of lightning as a divine harbinger of apocalyptic visions.[8] In this regard, Day and Bicknell's poem marks a shift otherwise expressed in the poem by the speaker: an African who also happens to be a Christian. He is therefore warranted in expecting divine justice. In the process, he upends long-standing interpretations of natural phenomena in the New World. Indeed, early modern writings routinely analyzed weather events and catastrophes as expressions of divine providence. Such understanding made the interpretation of Caribbean hurricanes and the destruction they wrought among English possessions somewhat problematic. The colonizing enterprise was undertaken in God's name: could He be punishing England? As Peter Hulme notes, hurricanes were therefore considered "less a message from God for his chosen people than an attribute of savagery itself . . . a fact confirmed by its tendency of attacking precisely . . . the marks of civility."[9] Day and Bicknell's Dying Negro allows for a different analysis: speaking from the London docks, he makes it possible to read even West Indian weather as a message from the Christian God, while maintaining the exotic, even malevolent, character of hurricanes.

Day and Bicknell's speaker calls for God but also fancies Discord and War rampaging through the West, and "Afric" as a vengeful spirit, "the stern genius of my native land / With delegated vengeance in his hand" crossing the seas to "pour the plagues of Hell on yon devoted shore."[10] Sitting at the threshold of pagan and Christian culture, the speaker in fact summons supernatural figures from both worlds, for a cause nevertheless marked as justifiable by Christian standards. The avenging genius of Africa is a staple of early abolitionist poems: he/she appears in the anonymously written *Jamaica; A Poem* (1777), "clank[ing] his chains, / And damn[ing] the

7. Chatterton, "Heccar and Gaira," 58.

8. Bicknell and Day, *The Dying Negro; A Poem* (London, 1773), was inspired by a black man who had preferred to commit suicide in London rather than be brought back to the Americas as a slave.

9. Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492–1797* (London: Methuen, 1986), 99–100.

10. Bicknell and Day, *Dying Negro*, 23.

race that robs his native plains"; in the 1788 version of "The Lovers: An African Eclogue," by Rushton's friend Hugh Mulligan: "Afric's Genius mourn'd an injur'd land, / And wrapt in clouds, her foe's destruction plann'd," and further "sees the wild, the dread tornado driven / By all th'avenging ministers of Heav'n."[11] When they do not invoke the embodied spirit of their land, the enslaved of abolitionist poetry call to pagan gods or the Almighty Christian one for the accomplishment of their revenge. By surrendering revenge to divine agency expressed in the elements, speakers in these poems find for their pain a form acceptable to all that allows them not to stain the moral righteousness of their anger.

Nevertheless, Mulligan's poem goes a step further in its depiction of slave violence. It follows two African lovers, Bura and Zelma, after they escape a slave ship moored off the coast of Africa and swim back to shore. From that vantage point they watch the ship. Zelma knows that "A warlike chief hath faithful friends prepar'd, / With engines meet to bind the drowsy guard . . . And free the captives while the tyrants sleep." As Bura laments being unable to join in the fight and "hurl swift vengeance on the pallid foe," the ship bursts into flames and "o'er the deep its shattered fragments roll."[12] Bura and Zelma voice support for retaliatory violence but they do not take part in it. The poem displays elements typical of the "rhetoric of sensibility" developed in abolitionist poetry; it contrasts a collective effort at retaliatory violence that is blown to pieces as quickly as it is introduced with two slaves idealized as "sentimental heroes . . . endowed with all the outward signs of a highly developed sensibility" whose commitment to revenge remains wholly verbal.[13] Revenge, the poem tells us, is a passion any person with feeling can understand. It is also morally condemnable and a concrete threat to slavery. In Francis Bacon's infamous words, "revenge is a kind of wild justice which the more Man's nature runs to, the more ought the law to weed it out . . . in passing it over, [a man] is superior; for it is a prince's part to pardon."[14] Though slavery was undeniably a moral blight, the rejection of vengeance on moral grounds was ultimately a more telling way of differentiating civilized people from the savage.[15]

11. [Anonymous], "Jamaica, A Poem, In Three Parts" (London: William Nicoll, 1777), in *Caribbeana: An Anthology of English Literature of the West Indies*, ed. Thomas W. Krise (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 332; [Hugh Mulligan], "The Lovers: An African Eclogue," *The Gentleman's Magazine* 54 (January 1784): 199–200.

12. [Mulligan], "The Lovers," 200.

13. Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 74.

14. Bacon, "Of Revenge," in *The Essays of Francis Bacon*, ed. Clark Sutherland Northup (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1908), 15.

15. On this topic, see for example Voltaire's popular play *Alzire* (1736), in which the villainous Spaniard Guzman, stabbed by the vengeful Indian hero Zamor, forgives him on his

According to French philosophe and historian of the West Indies Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, Africans were "a particular species of men," physiologically disposed to surrender to passion, "and this is the reason why they are more effeminate, more indolent, more weak, and unhappily more fit for slavery."[16] Of all the passions enslaved Africans were disposed to surrender to, revenge was particularly problematic both as an expression of their alleged inferiority and as a response to the morally reprehensible conditions in which they were kept by Europeans. For most British abolitionists, slavery gave the enslaved no chance at reasonable action; therefore, it was no surprise they should act so irrationally. By imagining retribution spoken by the enslaved but performed by the Most High, poets could endorse the punishment of enslavers but retain moral righteousness and avoid being accused of stoking the fires of slave revolt. The sympathetic and necessarily passive enslaved speaker in Hugh Mulligan's "The Slave: An American Eclogue" makes clear the function revenge is expected to play in the abolitionist rhetoric of sensibility: "Will thy slow vengeance never never fall? / . . . Oh hear a suppliant wretch's last sad prayer! / Dart fiercest rage! Infect the ambient air! / This pallid race, whose hearts are bound in steel, / By dint of suff'ring teach them how to feel."[17] Bringing up revenge made for titillating reading. It spiced up the pathos of poetic slaves' complaints with exciting and cataclysmic visions, but abolitionist authors did not go as far as condoning, or even quite portraying retributive violence. In this, Rushton's *West Indian Eclogues* stand out. Undeniable parallels exist between Mulligan's and Rushton's eclogues, notably in their organization by time of day and location, and in their depiction—however abstract—of violence performed by the enslaved.[18] Crucially, Rushton's poem departs from Mulligan's in featuring a speaker who actually performs revenge.

The theme of revenge pervades the *West Indian Eclogues*, but it plays a central role in the fourth and final eclogue. It colors the midnight monologue of Loango, whose wife Quamva has been "torn from [his] arms by that accursed white," the plantation owner. The poem begins with the elements already raging: "the fierce northern tempest" is hitting the island and we find Loango "At this dread hour, deep in an orange grove" where he used to meet Quamva.[19] She is the only reason Loango can bear enslave-

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deathbed with these words: "Observe / The difference, Zamor, 'twixt thy God and mine: / Thine teach thee to revenge and injury, / Mine to forgive and pity thee." See *The Works of Voltaire*, vol. 25, trans. the Rev. Mr. Francklin (London: 1763), 263.

16. [Raynal], *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, vol. 3, trans. J. Justamond (Dublin, 1776), 119–20.

17. Hugh Mulligan, "The Slave: An African Eclogue," in *Poems Chiefly on Slavery and Oppression, with Notes and Illustrations* (London: 1788), 6.

18. See Dellarosa, *Talking Revolution*, 156–57.

19. [Rushton], "Eclogue the Fourth," 20.

ment, but this is the third night in a row she has failed to meet him. He first calls upon "spirits of the air / Who rule the storms" to grant him his wish for revenge and destroy all but his wife.[20] As he reflects on their predicament, Loango is gradually overtaken by the paranoid conviction that Quamva genuinely enjoys the company of the planter. He now sees in the raging elements dreadful echoes of Quamva's wantonness, for "'Tis said that woman's mind / Still changes like the Hurricane's fierce wind."[21] Loango's wish for revenge thus narrows as he calls for it to "steel his soul" and give him the resolve necessary to kill Quamva, the planter, and himself. Mad with grief at the idea that Quamva may be false, Loango decides to act on his resolve. "Three, three must fall!" he declares, and fall they do. The poem's last two lines, separated from Loango's monologue by a bold dividing line, announce succinctly, "Then to the place, with frenzy fir'd, he fled / And the next morn beheld the mangled dead!"[22]

Rushton's *Eclogues* were widely and positively reviewed in the press, each journal reading Rushton through the prism of its political stance on slavery. Half of the *Monthly Review*'s assessment of Rushton's *Eclogues* explains, "writers have greatly exaggerated in their account of the *cruelties* exercised towards the Negroes."[23] Yet far from denying the brutality of slavery wholesale, the reviewer declares further that the enslaved must be "held in obedience by *fear* . . . for deterring them from mutiny and revolt, to which they are not a little prone."[24] This point echoes Edward Long's argument in his *History of Jamaica* (1774) according to which slave revolts were the reason for planters' "restrictions," rather than the other way around.[25] The *Critical Review*'s assessment of Rushton's poems reverses the *Monthly*'s causal link, finding it "extremely natural" for the enslaved to "[vent] imprecations and [plan] revenge against their oppressors." Yet, though planning revenge may be natural, ultimately it is not rhetorically sound: "the tears and supplications, not the impotent rage and defiance of the wretched, are most likely to melt their persecutors' hearts, if formed, as we trust some of our West-India planters are, of 'penetrable stuff.' "[26] The "irreducibility of Rushton's enslaved Africans to the stock model of the kneeling slave" clashed too vigorously with the "rhetoric of sensibility"

20. [Rushton], "Eclogue the Fourth," 21.
21. [Rushton], "Eclogue the Fourth," 21.
22. [Rushton], "Eclogue the Fourth," 24.
23. "Article 7, *The West-Indian Eclogues*," *Monthly Review* 77 (1787): 283.
24. *Monthly Review* 77 (1787): 283–84.
25. Long, *The History of Jamaica: Or, General Survey of the Antient and Modern State of that Island*, vol. 2 (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), 442–44.
26. *The Critical Review* 64 (1787): 435.

then central to discussions about slavery, and whose echoes can also be heard in the *General Magazine*'s review of Rushton's poems.[27]

The *General Magazine*'s review opens with the assertion that "the cruelties exercised on the negro slaves in Jamaica form the subject of these Eclogues." Contrary to the *Monthly Review*'s writer, this author has no doubt concerning the accuracy of Rushton's descriptions: "alas! He tells us, and we have too much reason to believe him, that 'in delineating the following scenes, he has painted from actual observation.' "[28] The review ends with a challenge to the sensibility of Rushton's readers: what he "describes must be felt in all its force by every reader whose breast is not rendered inhumanly callous by deriving immediate advantage from the most infamous of all human traffick!"[29] The review says little about the poems themselves, and entirely avoids discussing Rushton's use of revenge and violence, focusing instead on what in his poem appears to follow mainstream abolitionism's appeal to sensibility.

Rushton's poem emulates previous abolitionist texts, notably in its use of elemental tropes. Yet if Loango falls prey to this particular mode of pathetic fallacy, he quickly turns to even darker thoughts: the storm becomes a concrete cover for him to perform the very deeds previous abolitionist poems would have modestly eschewed. In Mulligan's African Eclogue, Zelma evokes the specter of rape mostly in order to emphasize her heroic resistance to it: "Think how against the tyrant's wiles I strove, / Us'd every art t' evade his lawless love."[30] Later in the poem, as she describes living on the ship after her abduction, she adds: "worse than all, to be their passion's slave; / T'avoid such lust I brav'd the dashing wave."[31] Jumping off the ship allows Zelma to elude rape and, subsequently, death in the ship's explosion. By contrast, Rushton makes the sexual terror wrought on the enslaved the principal reason for the retaliatory violence performed in the poem. In this, Rushton ties English abolitionist poetry with a motif that was then all the rage in French literature: *droit du seigneur.*

Droit du seigneur is a peculiar historical phenomenon: scholars all agree that if there may have been singular examples of it throughout European history, there is no evidence that the practice was ever common or widespread.[32] Yet it came to play a significant role in preparing public opinion

27. Dellarosa, *Talking Revolution*, 169. On the rhetoric of sensibility, see Carey, *British Abolitionism*.

28. *The General Magazine and Impartial Review* 1 (1787): 200.

29. *The General Magazine and Impartial Review* 1 (1787): 200.

30. Mulligan, "The Lovers," 199.

31. Mulligan, "The Lovers," 200.

32. See Frances Litvack, *Le Droit du Seigneur in European and American Literature* (Birmingham, AL: Summa Publications, 1984).

for the French Revolution, both in France and throughout Europe. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, French playwrights and philosophers took up the idea of *droit du seigneur* to criticize the privileges of the French aristocracy in the Ancien Régime. Among the earliest texts to treat *jus prima noctis* in Enlightenment France, Voltaire's play *Le droit du seigneur ou l'écueil du sage* was first performed in a truncated form in 1762, and in full in 1779.[33] Other texts followed that used the same topic, until the epitome of this genre, Beaumarchais' play *Le Mariage de Figaro* was written in the late 1770s and accepted for production in 1781, but its material was deemed so shocking as to warrant a delay of performance for three years. Changes included moving the action of the play from France to nearby Spain. *Le Mariage de Figaro* was finally performed on stage for the first time in 1784. Thomas Holcroft's English adaptation was performed the following year in London, and in 1786 Mozart created the opera version, confirming the broad success met by Beaumarchais' play around Europe.

Le Mariage takes place during one riotous day in the life of Figaro and Suzanne, servants to Count Almaviva. The two servants' wedding is to occur at the Count's palace, and they are preparing their nuptial room, conveniently located between the Count's and the Countess's chambers. A little too conveniently, it turns out: Suzanne reveals to Figaro that the Count, no longer content with courting local beauties, is intent on pursuing Suzanne, and—though he had previously abolished it—reviving "a certain gothic right . . . of sleeping the first night with every bride."[34] *Droit du seigneur* hangs like a dark cloud over the heads of sympathetic, socially lower-class protagonists. The practice represents feudal rights at their vilest, the performance of all that is unfair in this social hierarchy, as Figaro laments in his famous monologue in the Fifth Act: "and what, most noble Count, are your claims to distinction, to pompous titles, and immense wealth, of which you are so proud, and which, by accident, you possess?"[35] Nobility is the fruit of chance, not merit; unfair systems breed unfair situations and impunity, which in turn are likely to produce resentment, and worse. At the beginning of the Fifth Act, Figaro finds himself in a situation peculiarly similar to Loango's: though Figaro is aware that the Count's interest in Suzanne has gone unrequited, a series of *quid pro quo*s have convinced him that Suzanne is now about to meet the Count willingly in the middle of the night, in a chestnut grove. Figaro is standing in the grove by

33. Emmanuel Boussuge, "La présentation de *L'Écueil du Sage* aux Comédiens-Français," *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie* 47, no. 9 (October 2012), http://rde.revues.org/4925, accessed 25 November 2016.

34. From Thomas Holcroft's adaptation: *The Follies of a Day; Or, The Marriage of Figaro* (London, 1785), 2–3.

35. Holcroft, *Marriage of Figaro*, 92.

himself when he delivers his monologue, hoping to catch them in the act. His monologue expresses rage at his utter powerlessness, in a scene reminiscent of Rushton's final eclogue: considering the unbridgeable social gap that separates him from the count, Figaro notes bitterly that he is "a Lord—and I am—a Man!—Yes, I am a Man, but the nocturnal spells of that enchantress woman, soon shall make me a monster."[36] Suzanne and the Countess soon appear, fully aware of Figaro's presence, and they manage to defuse the situation, tricking the Count into abandoning his plan and proving Suzanne's faith to Figaro. Spouses are reunited with their rightful others; all's well that ends well.

In French texts the *droit du seigneur* is presented as a looming threat that is ultimately thwarted. It "is dramatized in narrative primarily in its subversion," providing representatives of the lower class with an opportunity for moral victory of some sort over the oppressive upper class.[37] *Le Mariage* discusses tyranny in the language of social comedy: "Dear Sirs, the comedy / We are now judging / Depicts the life—lest we're mistaken / Of the good people in the audience. / When oppressed, they curse and cry; / Writhe and seethe against their wrongs / Still everything ends with a song."[38] If *Le Mariage* certainly gestures towards social equality, it is achieved on stage through merriment, badinage, and music. Unity is performed in unison and it gives a social compact that all—status notwithstanding—ultimately have contributed to achieve. In the process, all geographic pretenses are abandoned: the play was not about Spaniards, but truly about the French, the very people sitting in the Parisian audience first in attendance. This is about a spirit that may suffer from censorship but mocks it in song: in France, the final song asserts, "By the accident of birth, / One is born a king, another a shepherd: / Chance created the distance between them; / Spirit alone can change it all. / Twenty kings, praised in life, / Will be forgotten in death; / While Voltaire is immortal."[39] The powerful rule the land for a time, but wit forever rules French hearts. On stage, Figaro and

36. Holcroft, *Marriage of Figaro*, 92.

37. Wendy Doniger, *The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 274.

38. My translation. The final act of Beaumarchais' play ends with a song, all characters taking a turn. The singing is left out of Holcroft's adaptation, including the play's famous last lines: "Or Messieurs la Comédie, / Que l'on juge en cet instant, / Sauf erreur, nous peint la vie / Du bon people qui l'entend. / Qu'on l'opprime; il peste, il crie; / Il s'agite en cent façons; / Tout finit par des chansons" (M. de Beaumarchais, *la Folle Journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro* [Lyon, 1785], 223).

39. My translation. "Par le sort de la naissance,/L'un est roi, l'autre est berger:/Le hasard fit leur distance;/L'esprit seul peut tout changer./De vingt Rois que l'on encense,/Le trépas brise l'autel;/Et Voltaire est immortel" (Beaumarchais, *la Folle Journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro*, 222).

Suzanne discuss between them an intimate plight that is simultaneously shared with the members of the audience, who are constantly asked to consider collectively its meaning. Some certainly did: *Le Mariage de Figaro* has long been considered both a sign of and an influence on the French Revolution, revolutionary leader Georges Danton famously declaring, "Figaro killed the nobility."[40]

Figaro's impact across the Channel was much more subdued, possibly because, as Litvack notes, "in England, where feudalism was a thing of the past, authors never seemed to take seriously the existence of the *droit*."[41] Edward Rushton might have begged to differ; his poems denounced all English forms of oppression—from impressment to colonial oppression from Ireland to the Americas—that were little removed from feudal oppression. That he knew rape to be a weapon of oppression is made clear in his use of it in his famous poem "Mary le More" and its sequels, "The Maniac" and "Mary's Death." Furthermore, Rushton did take into account the one system in which legal sexual assault—*droit du seigneur*, in short—not only did exist, but was actively used by all Europeans alike: in New World slavery. Feudalism survived in the "blood-sprinkled scythe of oppression" against the Irish, and the exploitation of the working class, and it was alive and well in Britain's overseas possessions, and as likely to generate revolt there as it would in France.[42] For Franca Dellarosa, Rushton's poetry can be characterized as "a process of sympathetic identification with the dispossessed, highlighting their potential for agency."[43] That process is also a progress, as Rushton's politics became increasingly radical throughout his life, an evolution illustrated in his poems. Yet, where Dellarosa sees Rushton's sympathetic identification with the enslaved culminating in his 1806 poem about heroic West Indian revolutionary Toussaint Louverture, I would argue that this poem in fact marks a turn in Rushton's poetic politics. Following Rushton's treatment of rape in colonial settings reveals how he moved from an uneasy position regarding slaves' potential for political agency in his early poetry to a more dedicated support for collective, political action in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution.

Slave revolt was regularly invoked in abolitionist poetry. Violence fueled by vengeance made for a terrifying and rhetorically efficient warning, but in order to convince English audiences of the soundness of the moderate, ameliorist goals of late eighteenth century British abolitionism, revenge—and by extension slave agency—could not possibly be shown to be success-

40. Litvack, *Le Droit du Seigneur*, 52.
41. Litvack, *Le Droit du Seigneur*, 35.
42. Rushton, "Mary's Death," *Poems* (Liverpool, 1806), 61.
43. Dellarosa, *Talking Revolution*, 102.

ful. Claudius K. Fergus argues that amelioration itself was a consequence of the 1760 Jamaican slave uprising known as Tacky's Rebellion. Faced with the concrete prospect of violent retaliation, planters pondered ways to save the institution, foremost among them Jamaican planter and author Edward Long, whose *History of Jamaica* had a lasting impact on English views of slavery. In the aftermath of Tacky's Rebellion, "amelioration became the most favored formula for anti-insurgency" in the minds of supporters and opponents of slavery alike, in no small part thanks to Long.[44] Rushton's poem, though it echoes French *droit du seigneur* scenarios, also bears the unmistakable mark of British amelioration. This is especially notable in the way Rushton's poem reverses *Figaro*'s movement from individual tale to communally relevant critique: much like the abolitionist rhetoric of its time, Loango's story stems from and evokes the collective history of slave revolt, but it eschews the notion of black political agency by devolving to the personal.

Loango's monologue in *The West Indian Eclogues* was inspired by an old and allegedly real West Indian story. In 1655, English troops sent by Oliver Cromwell as part of his Western Design against Spanish possessions in the New World invaded the island of Jamaica. During the campaign, many among those enslaved by the Spaniards joined the English in order to fight their more immediate oppressors. Charles Leslie recorded the story of one of them: a man married with children saw his wife taken and abused by a slave owner. The man vowed to take revenge, a project he shared with his wife shortly before revealing to her that "he never could take an Adulteress to his Arms; and therefore, closely embracing her, plunged a poniard to the Heart of the unhappy Creature: Thus, says he, I exert the Right of a Husband."[45] He then joined British ranks and later on, meeting the Spaniard on the field of battle, killed him. The unnamed slave, Leslie continues, was eventually freed by the English officer and future governor of Jamaica D'Oyley, and lived happily ever after on a piece of land graciously given him for his service to the crown. His son helped the English fight the French, but also "exposed his Life in the Pursuit of the rebellious Negroes."[46] Performed in the service of England, the nameless, enslaved man's revenge gained status as a feat of war. There could be a life after revenge after all: one could become an exemplary black colonial subject, even a defender of the slave order. In spite of the seemingly seditious nature of this

44. Claudius K. Fergus, *Revolutionary Emancipation: Slavery and Abolitionism in the British West Indies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 38.

45. Leslie, *A New History of Jamaica: From the Earliest Accounts, to the Taking of Porto Bello by Vice-Admiral Vernon* (London, 1740), 73.

46. Leslie, *A New History of Jamaica*, 73.

tale, it offered little to challenge an ameliorist model originally designed by planters for the perpetuation of slavery.[47]

Rushton mentions Leslie's account in footnotes, but nothing in the poem itself explicitly references the circumstances of the original anecdote: Loango's story is placed geographically, but outside of history. Rushton does away with context and utterly abstracts the original story, shrinking the world to a triangle between Loango, his wife Quamva, and the anonymous "accursed white" who took her away from him. In the original story—demoted to endnotes—the enslaved man only eventually killed the Spanish planter in a battle between British and Spanish troops, his individual story necessarily subsumed in global affairs. By contrast, Loango's tale is a claustrophobic close-up: in the stock, enclosed space of the orange grove, he "mourns his absent love" and declaims his plans for revenge to the raging elements under whose cover he intends to act. The climatic motif so typical of abolitionist poetry takes on a slightly different meaning when directly attached to violent retribution. In Cowper's later "The Negro's Complaint" (1788), for example, the hurricane is in fact God's answer to the prayers of a righteous man wronged. Secure in the Christian knowledge that revenge belongs to God, Cowper's titular Negro calls upon the Most High to unleash the violence he cannot himself perform if he is to retain moral high ground. By contrast, Hugh Mulligan describes an actual revolt whose effects he conflates with climatic phenomena and divine acts: as Zelma sees the commotion on the ship and points out that "moving fires around the decks now gleam," Bura answers: "The Gods are rous'd—hark! now their thunders roll." The enslaved, he declares, "fight for heaven, the CAUSE that gave [them] breath."[48] The poem's speakers are watching the action from the physical and moral safety of the shore, when the ship explodes, taking with it slavers and enslaved alike. They support in words the violence on the ship, but they do not participate. Morally unstained, they can return to their pastoral paradise, where "content and peace shall on [their] steps attend."[49]

Loango in turn does not merely decide to take "wild justice" into his own hands; conflated as it is with the rolling waves and the dark clouds, his revenge is taken out of his hands, naturalized. It is brought squarely into the realm of passion and cannot possibly be mistaken for, or quite understood as, a social or political act. Nevertheless, the act's social and political dimensions are inescapable, and seep into the poem: on two occasions, Loango calls his wife's abductor and rapist a "tyrant," a pointedly political

47. See Fergus, *Revolutionary Emancipation*, 38–41.
48. Mulligan, "The Lovers," 200.
49. Mulligan, "The Lovers," 200.

term Rushton also uses twice in the related footnote evoking Leslie.[50] This term is crucial, as it connects the tale of Loango to a more clearly political tale of European lore: the rape of Lucretia, as it was first told by the Roman historian Livy.

During Rome's early years as a monarchy, Lucretia, the wife of Roman nobleman Collatinus, is raped by Sextus Tarquinius, son of the King of Rome. In Livy's version of the story, Sextus blackmails Lucretia into compliance by telling her that otherwise he will kill her, kill a slave, and put the slave's body in her bed in order to claim that he caught them in the act. Sextus's narrative trickery works: Lucretia surrenders to him in order to save her husband's reputation, which would be forever tainted by allegations of her dalliance with a slave. Lucretia "chooses" rape over death: the latter would preclude her ability to tell her tale. Sextus would not have her body, but he would have control over her story: "at this dreadful prospect," Livy writes, "her resolute modesty was overcome, as if with force, by his victorious lust."[51] The day after the rape, Lucretia denounces Sextus to her husband and other Roman aristocrats. Lucretia secures the promise that they will avenge her and she stabs herself to death. But death still leaves her body and her story in the hands of others: appropriated by Collatinus's fellow nobleman Brutus, the vow becomes a solemn oath to overthrow the royal family. Brutus and his companions take Lucretia's body and story to the forum and muster a movement that leads to the birth of the Roman Republic.

Lucretia's story was the subject of hundreds of paintings, legal disquisitions, plays and poems, including William Shakespeare's "The Rape of Lucrece." The story belongs to a broad corpus of Western texts pertaining to the birth of nations. In an eighteenth-century world in which England and France struggled to decide which was heir to Rome by the dynamics of *translatio studii*—the notion of "transfer of knowledge" according to which the torch of wisdom passes from one seat of civilization to another across time—the story was both a reference and a model narrative tying in rather obvious ways *patria* and patriarchy. Indeed, for all the emphasis in Western art on the physical violation of Lucretia, the word "rape" itself evokes a very different crime in Roman law. Illuminating this difference also exposes the network of cultural assumptions that underlie Rushton's poem and ultimately prevent him from imagining Quamva's rape as a

50. Rushton, *West Indian Eclogues*: "a short time before that invasion the tyrant, his master, had barbarously torn her from him"; "having observed his cruel tyrant in the Spanish line, he flew to the place here he fought" (30–31n"s").

51. Titus Livius (Livy), *The History of Rome*, Book 1, trans. Benjamin O. Foster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 58:5.

potential foundation for New World black nationalism. Rape is derived from the Latin *raptus*, whose original and "primary meaning was forcible abduction," possibly covering—but not necessarily involving—sexual abuse: the precise act by which the band of misfits gathered by Rome's founder Romulus first became a nation in abducting the daughters of the neighboring Sabine tribe.[52] The term evolved with time to cover aspects of sexual assault that had previously fallen under *stuprum*, a legal category that "referred at base to sex in which one person was used by the other to gratify his lust. . . . The archaic notion of *stuprum* seems to have been one of pollution, so that the victim, however innocent of causing the act, was nevertheless irreparably tainted."[53] Only full-fledged Roman citizens could suffer *stuprum*, as

> neither society nor the law recognized slaves as legal persons: they belonged to their master, who could use them for his own sexual needs or hire them out for the pleasure of others. Similarly, in practice foreigners had no legal standing, and even citizen women or men who had once accepted gifts in return for sexual favours were deemed to have removed themselves from the protection of the law.[54]

The Sabine women and enslaved women could only ever suffer *raptus*—a crime consisting essentially in taking away another man's property—while only a woman with citizenship could suffer *stuprum*: one needs to have honor—a decidedly masculine quality that could nevertheless extend to related female citizens—for it to be tainted. As the wife of a prestigious member of Rome's nobility, Lucretia can—indeed, must—claim *stuprum*. She testifies to her physical violation and the related assault on her husband's reputation, and subsequently kills herself in order to keep his name pristine. Significantly, though, she does so only after obtaining from the men the promise that they will bypass the law and avenge her. This oath has profoundly subversive potential, as it implicitly threatens the very male order that made Lucretia's rape possible in the first place. But the men led by Brutus change their minds: they never do enact revenge on Sextus, and the impetus of revenge is sublimated into a political movement.

It is a testimony to Lucretia's racial privilege that she can invoke the rhetoric of revenge and be heard—if ultimately ignored—by a jury of

52. Diana C. Moses, "Livy's Lucretia and the Validity of Coerced Consent in Roman Law," in *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies*, ed. Angeliki E, Laiou (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1993), 50.

53. Moses, "Livy's Lucretia," 46, 47–49.

54. Elaine Fantham, "*Stuprum*: Public Attitudes and Penalties for Sexual Offenses in Republican Rome," in *Roman Readings: Roman Responses to Greek Literature from Plautus to Statius and Quintilian* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 118.

men. Roman outrage could flower over the dead body of a citizen; but in the Roman value system, slaves did not register at all. Quamva's circumstances are at some level comparable to Lucretia's: they are both assaulted by men in positions of power, and to that extent the planter is very similar to Sextus. Both Lucretia and Quamva die by stabbing because they were raped. Yet profound differences reside not only in the outcome of their story, but also in the manner in which these stories are conveyed. Lucretia's act of speech, the testimony by which she makes her private shame public, provides the original dynamic for a political movement. Even her agency in death flashes the possibility of active female citizenship in Rome, which was technically a fact for noble women, but in practice eminently restricted. By contrast, Rushton's Quamva is wholly silent. She has no agency whatsoever: she is an African slave in Jamaica, and the man assaulting her has legal if not moral rights over her. Her ordeal would not even have registered as *raptus* in Rome, but it does to Loango. We never find out for certain what happens to Quamva: she has not met Loango in their secret grove in three days, and he suspects the "pale-fac'd villain" has kept her from him. Loango knows that "Quamva . . . [t]he odious rape endures, but not enjoys," and calls on revenge and death; "he bravely falls, who stops a tyrant's breath."[55]

Loango's monologue rings with the vocabulary of Brutus, but its logic follows the Roman path in reverse: while it begins with political overtones and hints of rebellion—Loango calls on the elements to "hurl destruction on each cruel White"—it soon discards them to privilege the personal and wild justice. Loango jumps to conclusions regarding Quamva's agency and desires in terms at first strikingly reminiscent of Figaro: are not the planter's exterior signs of wealth, his "gaudy cloaths" and "downy bed" strong enough arguments to seduce her? After all, "'Tis said that woman's mind / Still changes like the Hurricane's fierce wind." "Fool that I was," Loango exclaims, "to think . . . that one so beauteous would endure / My lowly bed, a mat upon the floor," and soon he convinces himself that "she likes the Driver's bed."[56] First directed at the planter, his anger turns against Quamva, and eventually against himself. In the economy of Rushton's poem, Quamva dies so that Loango can "exert the right of the husband" which has been denied him in his station as a slave. In bypassing Quamva's voice, Loango repeats Brutus's appropriation of Lucretia's voice, with a significant difference: his speech has no political consequence. It rouses no outraged crowd to action; within the poem, its rhetoric is wholly solipsistic. Unlike the men in the Roman forum who longed for political inde-

55. Rushton, *West Indian Eclogues*, 20–21.
56. Rushton, *West Indian Eclogues*, 20–22.

pendence, Loango pines for a pastoral Africa of the mind, where he expects to be transported when he dies after achieving his revenge. Loango's newfound freedom has no political valence; it is the spiritual liberation of death.

For Dellarosa, the *Eclogues* express "the crucial political assumption underlying Rushton's poetics," a profoundly democratic vision that aims to "give voice to those whose voice is barely—if ever—heard."[57] Loango appropriates Quamva's voice, and in turn his voice is necessarily ventriloquized by Rushton—a process by which Rushton himself emulates Brutus metatextually. Rushton takes over Loango's voice to address British citizens—Rushton's peers—in their own language, intending to make them consider the possibility that enslaved Africans may well be men and brothers. Loango's language also confirms the same pseudo-scientific understandings of race expressed by Rushton in his footnotes, where he notably declares, "the desire of revenge is an impetuous, ruling passion, in the mind of these *African* slaves."[58] In the words of Beilby Porteus, Bishop of Chester, quoted by Rushton and the object of the poem's dedication: "Being heathens not only in their hearts, but in their lives, and knowing no distinction between vice and virtue, they give themselves up freely to the grossest immoralities, without being even conscious they are doing wrong."[59] In this, then, abolitionists saw little moral difference between enslaved Africans and "the fabulously wealthy Caribbean planter that emerged in fact and fiction . . . to represent the West Indian uncouthness, backwardness and degeneracy that inverted the acclaimed standards of English civility and culture."[60] Kathleen Wilson nevertheless argues that the planter embodied a "'secret, underground Self' of English society, and the projected screen of an imagined West Indian 'national character' was constantly disrupted with recognition as well as disavowal."[61] The Englishmen specifically targeted by this text certainly understood themselves to be moral, conscious people by contrast with West Indian planters, yet this did not necessarily mean they would identify with the enslaved. In this reworking of the Roman nation-making myth, Rushton's moral, abolitionist audience constitutes an alternative both to the degenerate West Indian planter and to a heathenish, immoral black nation: a community of sensible, moral Christians, dedicated to do what is best for all mankind. Rushton and English abolitionists could think of Africans as men and

57. Dellarosa, *Talking Revolution*, 156.

58. Rushton, *West Indian Eclogues*, 31–32n"x."

59. Quoted in Rushton, *West Indian Eclogues*, 32.

60. Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003), 130.

61. Wilson, *The Island Race*, 130.

brothers, but could not go so far as to think that they might be political men.

In 1787, Rushton was unable to imagine black revolt beyond the most epidermic: Loango, the only slave brought to action in the *Eclogues*, is driven by passion, and therefore unable to think politically. He defines the planter's tyranny in exclusively personal terms that echo ameliorist arguments: soothed by the proximity of his betrothed, Loango might have endured slavery forever. Treated with a modicum of decency, perhaps blackmailed with love, slaves might well make do with their lot. But it was decidedly impolitic to go after their wives, as Rushton asserted again in "Briton, and Negro Slave," a theatrical scene published in his *Poems* (1806). On a plantation in Jamaica, a Briton attempts to beat back a slave who comes to plead for the return of his wife: "E'en use me as you list—rail, threaten, torture, / All, all I will endure, so my lov'd Zuna, / My wife, my comfort, be not ravish'd from me." Only the restitution of his wife will calm his hunger for revolt, depicted in the language of animalistic predation: "but if she be denied me, not a shark / that prowls your bays, shall more delight in blood." Much like Loango, his wife is the sole reason he has placidly borne slavery in the first place: "pluck her away, / down, down the poor distracted Egbo comes, / But in his fall may pluck destruction round him."[62] The slave driver continues to beat and taunt him, and the scene ends rather abruptly as the brutal Briton promises to tell the slave's owner about their exchange. Although the female character here remains off page, as silent and passive as Quamva is in the *Eclogues*, she at least is not presented as a culprit. Taken in the light of Rushton's *Poems* as a whole, this peculiar scene seems suspended, perhaps by design, as if a motif inherited from the late eighteenth-century could only be left unfinished, interrupted by the advent of the hero of the Haitian Revolution, Toussaint Louverture.

Rushton's "Toussaint to His Troops" describes a scene from January 1802: the West Indian officer, standing on the cliffs of the Samana peninsula in the Northeast of the island of Hispaniola, watching the ships of the Leclerc expedition sent by Napoleon to subdue him and reestablish slavery.[63] The poem is Toussaint's imagined speech to his troops ahead of their fight against the French. He offers two options: "shall we crouch to Gallia's sway . . . or shall we rouse"?[64] Freedom is a God-given right for all of humankind, one for which the French once fought. But "now by freedom nerv'd no more," they have turned against Saint Domingue. He reminds

62. Rushton, "Briton, and Negro Slave," *Poems* (London: 1806), 84, 86, 87.

63. The first official news of the landing of the Leclerc expeditions was published in Europe in March 1802.

64. Rushton, "Toussaint to His Troops," *Poems* (London: 1806), 18.

them of the horrors of slavery, already overcome, and whips them into a frenzy before the coming battle, and the poem ends with a stirring call: "Assert great nature's cause, live free, or bravely die."[65] Toussaint's cry is not fundamentally different from Loango's, but their positions are: Toussaint speaks here to a group of peers, friends whom he defines in turn as warriors, men, fathers, "towering spirits," a community of men spiritually transformed by their fight to secure freedom. By the time this poem was published in 1806, Haiti had for over two years been an independent nation, and Great Britain was its main trading partner. The outcome of this war, uncertain in the poem, was by then known to all readers: Toussaint had died in a French prison, but his friends had prevailed. They had "asserted nature's cause"—that all human kind has a right to access the divine riches of the earth equally—and forced recognition that they, also, were *men*, as singularly masculine as their former French and English foes.

Of necessity, they defined themselves as *man* by contrast to their former subhuman—and unmanned—status, but also literally by contrast to women and children, passive potential victims of oppression. The difference between Loango and Toussaint is stark and perhaps obvious: it lies in the political prospect that the revolution, then already fifteen years old, had already built. Toussaint does not speak to his brethren like Brutus in the forum: this moment on the eve of nation-making has occurred already. Rushton's radical politics show here precisely in the fact that they have evolved with the times. Signs of the liberal condescension typical of early, conventional abolitionism evident in the *Eclogues* have here disappeared. Speculation based on racialist assumptions and a legacy of racial representation has been replaced by a heroic vision rooted in historical facts. Rushton was not one to deny black political agency when it stared him in the face. The most telling sign of Rushton's change may be in his use of the *droit du seigneur* motif in this poem. In a stanza dedicated to remembering what their lives used to be like under slavery, Toussaint enjoins his soldiers to think of their wives, whom "the pallid brood / have by torturing arts subdu'd."[66] This threat now embodied by the French fleet is summoned as one of several reasons why they should stand and fight together. They will fight in order to spare their families such a fate, and spare their children the experience of slavery. But more important may be the language Rushton uses to describe this abuse. There is no question of potential consent: the subjection of the soldiers' wives was obtained through white oppressors' educated use of torture. Though the image drawn in those lines is undeniably masculinist, it also sets family and community as the reason for the struggle. In exhorting his troops to fight, Toussaint emphasizes the stakes of

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65. Rushton, "Toussaint to His Troops," 22.
66. Rushton, "Toussaint to His Troops," 20.

their battle: "remember, should your foes succeed, / that not yourselves alone, but all you love must bleed."[67] There is nothing pure nor necessary in the death of women here, nor is it played for symbolism. In this moment between calm and the coming battle, between the order former slaves have created for themselves and the chaos and violence brought back by the French, rape is shown as a tool of communal oppression. As seen by Rushton, Toussaint's men need no woman's corpse to envisage a polity. To be certain, Rushton's creation is necessarily ventriloquized. But by portraying Louverture and his troops in this moment of abeyance, Rushton evokes as much the political promise rising in the West Indies as he does his inability—and possible reluctance—to encompass it in classical European tropes. The stage is set for an experiment that cannot be bound by the European imaginary.

Rushton's variations on *droit du seigneur* testify to the problematic stance of white abolitionist writers in the late eighteenth century. Rushton used the motif of rape in order to summon the sympathy of his white, British readers for the black enslaved population of Great Britain's West Indian colonies. He relied on a system of representation in which the female body had traditionally come to stand as a metaphor for the body politic, and its violation a pretext to set terms for ethnic and national belonging. This motif traditionally applied to free citizens rather than slaves. In attempting to extend it to people whom neither he nor his readers considered able to rule themselves, Rushton exposed the incapacity of early abolitionist ideas adequately to address the issues raised by Atlantic slavery. Over time, as his initial English-centered abolitionist verse was illuminated by the Haitian Revolution, Rushton appears to have found out that rape can only be a working metaphor to those who do not systematically risk it or its consequences. The "rape motif" plays to this day a crucial part in West Indian culture, serving as a problematic foundation for the politics it once served to deny.[68]

University of Connecticut at Stamford

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67. Rushton, "Toussaint to His Troops," 20.

68. On the impact of the "myth of foundational rape" on current identity politics in the French West Indies, see Stéphanie Mulot, "Le mythe du viol fondateur aux Antilles françaises," *Ehtnologie française* 37, no. 3 (Juillet–Septembre 2007): 517–24.

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