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Romantic Voodoo: Obeah and British Culture, 1797–1807

THOMAS DE QUINCEY, SEARCHING IN THE *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845) for a metaphor equal to the intense depression brought on by his sister's early death, compares the power of grief over the bereaved mind to the "ignoble witchcraft of the poor African *Obeah*" in its capacity to cause even death if left to run its course. He adds an explanatory footnote on "*African Obeah*" that begins: "Thirty years ago it would not have been necessary to say one word of the Obi or Obeah magic; because at that time several distinguished writers (Miss Edgeworth, for instance, in her Belinda) had made use of this superstition in fictions, and because the remarkable history of Three-fingered Jack, a story brought upon the stage, had made the superstition notorious as a fact."[1] Although De Quincey's memory misleads him by some ten to fifteen years, obeah or obi, a religion practiced by black slaves in the British West Indies, had indeed become notorious toward the end of the eighteenth century when it held the British reading and play-going public under its spell for a decade. *Obi; or, Three-Fingered Jack* opened in July of 1800; the same year Charlotte Smith published "The Story of Henrietta," a Gothic novella transposed to Jamaica, in which an obscure "dread" of obeah augments the heroine's more concrete terrors.[2] Maria Edgeworth drew on obi both in *Belinda* (1801) and in her story "The Grateful Negro" in *Popular Tales* (1804), the latter set in a Jamaican plantation during a slave revolt. Thomas Campbell uses "Wild Obi" to characterize African barbarity in *The Pleasures of Hope* (1799); obeah features explicitly in William

1. Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater and Other Writings*, ed. Grevel Lindop (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 120.

2. Charlotte Smith, *The Letters of a Solitary Wanderer: Containing Narratives of Various Description*, 2 vols. (London: Sampson Low, 1800) 2: 97. For the other works mentioned in this paragraph, see below.

Shepherd's lyric "The Negro's Incantation," which appeared in the *Monthly Magazine* in 1797, and implicitly in two poems published at about the same time, "The Negro's Imprecation" and an ode on "The Insurrection of the Slaves at St. Domingo." "The Three Graves," a ballad begun by Wordsworth in 1797 and extended by Coleridge, was partly inspired (according to Coleridge's note) by Bryan Edwards' account of "the *Oby* witchcraft" in his well-known *History . . . of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (1793), and Wordsworth's "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" (1798) may owe something to Edwards as well. James Montgomery includes a passage on the "appalling" practice of obeah among the West Indian Maroons (self-governing communities of escaped slaves and their descendants) in his anti-slavery epic, *The West Indies* (composed in 1807 and published two years later). The decade of British fascination with obi closes with a burlesque set in Jamaica and England and featuring a Jamaican enchanter, *Furibond; or, Harlequin Negro,* produced at the Drury Lane during the Christmas pantomime season of 1807.

The representation of obeah in British writing during the early romantic period—which has gone all but entirely unnoted since De Quincey—might once have been quickly surveyed and catalogued as an overlooked variant of romantic exoticism, analogous to literary "Orientalism" or to the depiction of the American Indian in works like Chateaubriand's *Atala*.[3] But, as much recent work in the theory and history of culture has stressed, Western exoticism is rarely a matter simply of the picturesque, the novel, or the bizarre. Particularly in an era of empire building, expanding colonialist activity, and growing European domination over the rest of the globe, literary exoticism cannot easily be disentangled from political and economic developments.[4] The literary construction of the geographically or racially

3. There are scattered references to the representation of obeah in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century British writing in both Wylie Sypher's *Guinea's Captive Kings: British Anti-Slavery Literature of the XVIIIth Century* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1942) and Eva Beatrice Dykes, *The Negro in Romantic Thought: A Study in Sympathy for the Oppressed* (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1942).

4. The ground-breaking work in this regard is, of course, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979). For a more recent study particularly relevant to European representations of the Caribbean, although it stops just short of the period I am concerned with here, see Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (London: Methuen, 1986). For a helpful overview of British attitudes toward and perceptions of the non-European world in the early colonial period, see also P. J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: British Perceptions of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: Dent, 1982).

"other," however innocent it may initially appear (as in the cult of the "noble savage"), rarely evades some form of complicity with the making and maintaining of Western hegemony. It would be especially naive to ignore the economic, geopolitical, and ideological issues implicit in texts set in the West Indies at a time when Britain, France, and Spain were vying for dominance over the Caribbean, in a struggle profoundly affected by the French Revolution; when agitation and debate in England over the slave trade entailed a fundamental rethinking of British policy regarding its Caribbean colonies; and when the European powers were for the first time defied by a national independence movement led by blacks, the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804. The romantic concern with obeah, which De Quincey calls a "dark collusion with human fears," grows out of British anxieties regarding power: the fluctuations of imperial power, the power of slaves to determine their own fate, the power of democratic movements in France, in England, and in the Caribbean. At the same time, the literary portrayal of obeah illustrates the power of representation to generate, direct, or exorcise such anxieties. The representation of obeah, that is to say, functions in this period rather like the practice of obeah itself.

Like voodoo, obeah is a "hybrid" or "Creolised" Caribbean religion with indigenous West African roots, which includes such practices as ritual incantation and the use of fetishes or charms.[5] Although sometimes conflated, the two are distinct: Obeah has been traced to Ashanti-Fanti origins (tribes of the Gold Coast or modern Ghana region) and is more purely concerned with magic or sorcery than voodoo, a more highly elaborated system of beliefs with origins in the Fon and Yoruba cultures (of the Dahomey or modern Benin region).[6] But for the British mind during the romantic period, obeah held much the same connotations as voodoo inspires (at least popularly) now: a mysterious cult of obscure African provenance, associated with fetishes, witchcraft, and poison, eroticism, and revenge. At a time when "voodoo" had not yet entered the English language, "obeah" tended to signify whatever forms of supernatural beliefs and religious practices the British encountered among the slaves.[7] "Certain exotic words," Alfred Métraux has written

5. George Eaton Simpson, *Black Religions in the New World* (New York: Columbia UP, 1978) 12; Michel S. Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989) 22.

6. In addition to Simpson (esp. 51–110) and Laguerre (esp. 22–38), see Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti,* tr. Hugo Charteris (New York: Schocken, 1972) and Ivor Morrish, *Obeah, Christ and Rastaman: Jamaica and Its Religions* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1982), esp. 40–48.

7. Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development*

of voodoo, "are charged with evocative power"; it is this power which "obeah" held for romantic period England and which my title gestures towards (15). But it should be stressed from the outset that much of the evocative power of obeah stemmed from associations, not only with the supernatural or with (in a double sense) "black" magic, but with political power as well, specifically with slave rebellions and the incursions and revolts of West Indian Maroons.

The role of voodoo in slave revolts in Saint Domingue has often been stressed, from C. L. R. James's ground-breaking history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins,* to Michel S. Laguerre's recent study *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti*. An African from Guinea named Makandal, a voodoo priest or "*houngan*" and guerilla leader, led a slave revolt in 1757 meant to extirpate the white colonists from the island, in part through the massive use of poison. The 1791 rebellion which sparked the Revolution was begun by another voodoo priest named Boukman, who in a night-time ceremony held before the opening battle distributed talismans and invoked the *loas* (Laguerre 52–54, 60). He concluded the ceremony with a prayer exalting the god of the Africans over the "god of the white man," and admonishing those slaves who wore crosses: "Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the heart of us all."[8] Obeah functioned similarly in slave revolts in the British West Indies, with obeah-men "essential in administering oaths of secrecy" and sometimes distributing fetishes meant to "immunize the insurgents from the arms of the whites" (Patterson 192). As did voodoo, obeah played a role at once inspirational and practical in facilitating resistance and revolt among the slaves: it provided an "ideological rallying point" in sanctioning rebellion, afforded meeting places and leaders, and formed a repository for the "collective memory of the slaves" by preserving African traditions which could be opposed to the dominant colonial culture. Even the illusory promise of invulnerability could provide much needed morale for struggles in which the whites were almost always better armed than the black rebels.[9]

The association of obeah and slave revolts was well known to the English writers who helped popularize obeah (however briefly) in the

and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1967) 185.

8. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution,* 2nd. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1963) 87.

9. Laguerre 70; Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the New World* (1979; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1981) 28, 47.

romantic period; in fact, it was this association which made "obi" a matter of interest, rather than an obscure slave custom to be mocked and dismissed. Obeah had first been described for the English reading public in James Grainger's *The Sugar-Cane* (1764), published before the subversive connotations of obeah had been established. Writing as a planter and physician, vaguely sympathetic to the plight of the slaves but primarily concerned with disseminating proper techniques of plantation management, Grainger includes the effects of "Obia" in a catalogue of slave diseases, real and imaginary. "Luckless he who owns / The slave, who thinks himself bewitched"; the "wretch" is sure to perish, unless "some subtle slave / (Such, Obia-men are styled)" provides an antidote or counter-spell.[10] Obeah would be purely a comic matter if it did not threaten the planter's investment in human capital:

> In magic spells, in Obia, all the sons
> Of sable Afric trust:—Ye sacred Nine!
> (For ye each hidden preparation know)
> Transpierce the gloom which ignorance and fraud
> Have render'd awful; tell the laughing world
> Of what these wonder-working charms are made.
> (4: 381–86)

Grainger's mock-heroic approach to obeah reflects the common attitude among West-Indian planters at the time, who (according to Bryan Edwards) "laughed at" the slaves' magical-religious practices as so many "harmless stratagems" for protecting their property and resolving their private quarrels. Obeah here evokes not some occult power or political threat but rather the "ignorance" of superstitious Africans and the wickedness of the "conjurers" among them; it can even be appropriated by the slave-holder, as Grainger suggests in a note: "and as the Negro-magicians can do mischief, so they can also do good on a plantation, provided they are kept by the white people in proper subordination" (14: 507). This attitude changes significantly, however, in the aftermath of the Tacky Rebellion of 1760, a "very formidable" insurrection in Jamaica led (like most slave revolts of the period) by African-born slaves.[11] As Edwards writes, an obeah-man was the "chief instigator and

10. James Grainger, *The Sugar-Cane* 4: 368–69, 378–79, in *The Works of the English Poets, From Chaucer to Cowper,* ed. Alexander Chalmers, 21 vols. (London: J. Johnson et al., 1810) 14: 507 (cited by book and line).

11. Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies,* 2 vols. (Dublin: Luke White, 1793) 2: 87–88. For the prominent role of African-born slaves in slave insurrections, see Genovese 98.

oracle of the insurgents," who had "administered the Fetish or solemn oath to the conspirators, and furnished them with a magical preparation which was to render them invulnerable"; it was this incident that led the Jamaican assembly to enact a law for the "suppression and punishment" of "*Obeah* practices"—henceforth a capital offence (2: 87–88). As a cultural signifier within British colonial discourse, obeah shifts from denoting a harmless and appropriable "primitive" belief underscoring the cultural superiority of the British, to a "savage" custom which evinces African barbarity and must be outlawed and obliterated by the whites. The change emerges quite starkly in juxtaposing Grainger's easy mockery with Shepherd's "Negro Incantation," an ode directly inspired by Edward's *History*:

> Haste—the magic shreds prepare—
> Thus the white man's corse we tear.
> Lo! feathers from the raven's plume,
> That croaks our proud Oppressor's doom.
> Now to aid the potent spell,
> Crush we next the brittle shell—
> Fearful omen to the foe,
> Look! the blanched bones we throw.
> From mouldering graves we stole this hallow'd earth,
> Which, mix'd with blood, winds up the mystic charm;
> Wide yawns the grave for all of northern birth,
> And soon shall smoke with blood each sable warrior's arm.[12]

The magical ingredients—bones, teeth, herbs—which are transparently ludicrous to Grainger become horrific, as potential signifiers of the "white man's doom," in Shepherd's incantation.

Edwards was not the only early writer on the West Indies to connect Obeah with revolts of slaves or maroons. Edward Long had discussed the role of a "famous obeiah man or priest" in the Tacky Rebellion in his *History of Jamaica* (1774)—a work notorious for its virulent racism—and stated that among the "Coromantyns" (slaves shipped from the Gold Coast) the "*obeiah-men*" were the "chief oracles" behind conspiracies and would bind the conspirators with the "fetish or oath."[13] J. G.

12. William Shepherd, "The Negro Incantation," in *The Poetical Register, and Repository of Fugitive Poetry, for 1803*, 2nd. ed. (London: Rivington, 1805) 413–15; first published in the *Monthly Magazine* for July 1797 (Sypher 208).

13. Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica*, 3 vols. (London: T. Lowndes, 1774) 2: 451–52, 473.

Stedman, in his *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*, published in 1796 with illustrations by Blake, noted the "*obias* or amulets" which the rebel slaves or maroons would wear around their neck, and which they trusted would render them "invulnerable" in battle.[14] Benjamin Moseley's *Treatise on Sugar* (1799) appends to an account of "OBI" the story of "*Three fingered* JACK, the terror of Jamaica in 1780," an escaped slave who "ascended above SPARTACUS" in his depredations and plans for revenge. As a notorious Obi-man, Jack had become "not only the dread of the negroes, but there were many white people, who believed he was possessed of some supernatural power." Jack was at last subdued, however, by a "christianed" slave who was promised his freedom for producing Jack's three-fingered hand, and who believed his conversion to Christianity or "*white* OBI" rendered him immune to Jack's sorcery.[15]

The association of obeah with the depredations of maroons and with slave rebellions would not seem in itself, however, to explain the decade of troubled fascination with obeah in England; Long's account of obeah and myalism (which he considers aspects of a single cult), and the central role of "obeiah men" in the Tacky Rebellion (aimed at the "entire extirpation of the white inhabitants"), predates the literary vogue for obeah by more than twenty years (2: 416–52). A great deal had changed, however, between 1774 and 1797. The popular belief in the necessity of the slave system for the success of the sugar colonies and the contemptuous attitudes toward Africa and Africans which writers like Long developed in support of slavery had been challenged by the rapid growth of the Abolition movement, which began officially in 1787 and, following the circulation of thousands of anti-slavery tracts and a mass petition campaign among a sympathetic public, almost succeeded in banning the slave trade in 1791. But the anti-slavery movement had in turn become virtually derailed, within a year of its near victory, by political developments in France, Saint Domingue, and England itself.

The fall of the Bastille had initially found widespread sympathy in England, but Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)—in which the Paris revolutionaries are compared to a "gang of Maroon slaves, suddenly broke loose from the house of bondage" and "ill-fitted" for liberty—anticipated by only a few years both the pervasive English

14. J. G. Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam in Guiana on the Wild Coast of South America From the Years 1772–1777*, ed. Rudolf van Lier, 2 vols. (Barre, MA: Imprint Society, 1971) 2: 280, 364.

15. Benjamin Moseley, *A Treatise on Sugar*, 2nd. ed. (London: John Nichols, 1800) 197–98, 200.

reaction against the increasingly radical (and bloody) revolution across the Channel, and the widespread association of Jacobinism with slave rebellions in the Americas.[16] Already by the end of 1791 a Jamaican official, terrified by the rise of Jacobin ideology among the black revolutionaries in Saint Domingue, warned the Colonial Office that "the ideals of liberty have sunk so deep in the minds of *all* Negroes, that wherever the greatest precautions are not taken they will rise."[17] In 1792 an anonymous pamphlet identified the supporters of Abolition as the "JACOBINS OF ENGLAND," and the next year the Earl of Abingdon remarked in Parliament, "What does the abolition of the slave trade mean more or less, than liberty and equality? What more or less than the rights of man? And what are the rights of man, but the foolish principles of this new philosophy? If proofs are wanting, look at the colony of St Domingue and see what the rights of man have done there."[18] Wilberforce and other leading abolitionists began to view the popular campaign as politically dangerous, and moved to dissociate themselves from outspoken radicals like Thomas Hardy, who had declared that the "rights of man are not confined to this small island, but are extended to the whole human race, black and white, high or low, rich or poor" (Walvin 113). Burke withdrew his initial support of the anti-slavery movement, and by 1792 was arguing that the "continuance of the trade and servitude, regulated and reformed," was preferable to the abolition of the slave trade or of slavery itself.[19] The new mood of reaction frequently verged on paranoia, as in Clara Reeve's statement (in a 1792 treatise on education) that the West-Indian slaves, in response to anti-slavery efforts in England, were not only "preparing to rise against their masters, and to cut their throats," but once free would come to England, "mix with the natives, and spoil the breed of the common people."[20]

In face of the anti-Jacobin reaction the Abolition movement, having peaked by early 1792, rapidly declined and continued to lose momentum until 1804, when French democracy was no longer a threat and the political situation in the Caribbean had significantly changed (Anstey

16. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France,* and Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961) 48.

17. James Walvin, *England, Slaves and Freedom, 1776–1838* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986) 115.

18. Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition 1760–1810* (London: MacMillan, 1975) 266; Walvin 116.

19. Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776–1848* (London: Verso, 1988) 148.

20. Clara Reeve, *Plans of Education; With Remarks on the Systems of Other Writers,* ed. Gina Luria (New York: Garland, 1974) 91.

343). The progress during this period of the Haitian Revolution was watched in England, for the most part, with great apprehension, particularly in the years 1793–98, when British armies waged a protracted and disastrous struggle in Saint Domingue to conquer the colony and reinstitute slavery.[21] James writes that the British lost as many soldiers in five years of fighting against the black Jacobins—at least 40,000 dead and another 40,000 otherwise taken out of service—as they would over the entire course of the Peninsular War (200). British fears in this period gave a fresh impetus to the growth of racist attitudes. The *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1794 declared that the "Negro race are but a set of wild beasts, when let loose without control"; Burke characterized the blacks of Saint Domingue as a "race of fierce barbarians" (Geggus 128–30). Bryan Edwards included a harrowing "Narrative of the Calamities Which Have Desolated the Country Ever Since the Year 1789" in his *Historical Survey* of Saint Domingue (1797), ascribing the revolution to the "vile machinations" of French and English radicals (including both the French and British abolition societies) and portraying the rising black nation as "savage man, let loose from restraint."[22] He depicts massacres of white colonists in racist and blood-curdling terms: "Upwards of one hundred thousand savage people, habituated to the barbarities of Africa, avail themselves of the silence and obscurity of the night, and fall upon the peaceful and unsuspecting planters, like so many famished tygers thirsting for human blood" (63). Even Coleridge, a friend and supporter of the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, recoiled at the "Horrors of St Domingo," describing the black revolutionaries as "degraded Savages" unprepared for freedom.[23] In this context—particularly against the background of what Genovese calls the "interlocking French and Haitian revolutions" (93)—the literary vogue for obeah in England seems anything but incidental exoticism.

For Genovese, it is the "passage from an Afro-American religious call to holy war to the universalist claims of the Rights of Man," from Boukman's invocation of the *loas* to Toussaint's secularized, post-colonial version of Jacobinism, that marks the shift from isolated slave

21. David Geggus, "British Opinion and the Emergence of Haiti, 1791–1805," *Slavery and British Society 1776–1846,* ed. James Walvin (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1982) 127–28.

22. Bryan Edwards, *An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingo* (London: John Stockdale, 1797) xix-xx.

23. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Essays on His Own Times in* The Morning Post *and* The Courier, ed. David V. Erdman, 3 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978) 3: 195; for Robert Southey's equally dubious reaction to the Haitian Revolution, see Geggus 145.

rebellions to a modern anti-colonialist ideology posing a "new and more dangerous threat to the old regimes than anything previously encountered" (93, 123). There were scattered recognitions of such a threat in England, such as the remark in *The Times* in 1802 that "a Black State in the Western Archipelago is utterly incompatible with the system of all European colonisation" (Geggus 136). But it was largely through denying a coherent ideology or political aspirations to black insurgents, representing them instead as "savages," stirred up by African sorcerers and European demagogues and giving vent to uncontrollable, barbaric fury, that English fears of black empowerment could most readily be vented if not entirely allayed. From its dual association with slave rebellions and "African" superstition, obeah was uniquely positioned to represent at once a tangible threat and an empty show of power which would dissipate when confronted by civilized superiority. It is not Toussaint but the obeah-man who is made to embody British colonial anxiety in the critical decade of 1797–1807.

By 1797, British attitudes toward the West Indies had evolved into a complex and somewhat contradictory structure of feeling: sympathy for enslaved Africans in the wake of the massive abolition campaign of 1787–1792; fear of black revolt and self-determination as exemplified by the "Horrors of St Domingo"; a slowly developing consensus—which would later help facilitate the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and of colonial slavery in 1833—that British interests would be better served by a system based on wage labor than by one based on enforced servitude. Most representations of obeah in the early romantic period are marked by similar complexity and ambivalence, tending to inspire pity as well as fear in relation to enslaved Africans; obeah can evoke the slaves' legitimate grievances as well as the illegitimacy of their means for redressing them. Campbell's lines on obeah in the *Pleasures of Hope* are unusual in appealing almost solely to terror, personifying "Obi" (according to Campbell's own note) "as the evil spirit of the African."[24] The passage occurs in a section heralding the spread of "Improvement" over the "spacious world" under the aegis of European dominion, the progress, as it were, of Progress: "Thy handmaid arts shall every wild explore, / Trace every wave, and culture every shore" (15). Although heralding an end to slavery a few lines later in the poem—"as the slave departs, the man returns"—Campbell employs obeah to demonize the black African:

24. *The Poetical Works of Thomas Campbell*, ed. W. A. Hill (Boston: Little, Brown, 1855) 318.

> In Libyan groves, where damned rites are done,
> That bathe the rocks in blood, and veil the sun,
> Truth shall arrest the murderous arm profane,
> Wild Obi flies—the veil is rent in twain.

While Campbell acknowledges that "Obi, or Orbiah" is known only among West Indian blacks, he does not hesitate to transfer it to "their kinsmen on the coast of Africa" (318); an instance of how Africa tended to be viewed in this period, through the lens of the slave trade, as a "dependency" or annex of the sugar colonies (Marshall and Williams 227). Campbell's fantasy of African human sacrifice arrested by the "rule" of European improvement suggests how easily anti-slavery sentiment could coexist with a conviction of the essential savagery of sub-Saharan Africa and its peoples, implicitly supporting the continued domination of West Indian blacks even while lamenting their enslavement; it also looks forward to the nineteenth-century British exploitation of Africa in the name of civilization and progress.

Shepherd's "Negro Incantation" (inspired by Edwards' account of the Tacky Rebellion) is more profoundly ambivalent. It begins with an open appeal to fear—"Hail! ye sacred horrors hail!"—as a "hoary wizard" named Congo invokes the "spirits of the swarthy dead" to rouse their descendants to "vengeance fell" on the white man. But Shepherd's imaginary rendition of the slaves' "words of mystic might, that seal their tyrants' fate" suggests that their intended massacre is motivated by legitimate indignation as well as by African savagery:

> Go! let the memory of the smarting thong
> Outplead the pity that would prompt to save:
> Go! let the Oppressor's contumelious wrong,
> Twice nerve the hero's arm, and make the coward brave.

"The Negro's Imprecation" (1799–1800), spoken by a slave or maroon named Oyeo ("breathing many a curse"), similarly incites the "Spirits of the sable dead" to arise and "mark the white man's doom," while simultaneously appealing to the Christian reader's sympathy for the African's legitimate "wrongs":[25]

> Think'st thou the God thou taught me to revere,
> The God (thou said'st) who dwells enshrined above,

25. "The Negro's Imprecation," *The Meteors*, 2 vols. (London: A. and J. Black, 1799–1800) 2: 53–56. The poem is signed "W. C."; I have been unable to identify these initials.

Heeds not the wrongs poor Oyeo suffers here?
But on *thy* cruel tribe looks down with *partial* love?

A comparable ambivalence marks the "Ode" on "The Insurrection of the Slaves at St. Domingo," published in *The Courier* in 1797, and spoken by a rebel slave named Orrah.[26] On the one hand the "Ode," like Campbell's *Pleasures of Hope,* plays on European fantasies of African human sacrifice, describing the victims of Orrah's "murderous band" as a "grateful sacrifice" to the "Genius" of Africa, offered up by the successful rebels "around the votive fire." But the African god—"Whidah"—is represented as having incited the slaves to a just cause:

"O, my troubled spirit sighs
When I hear my people's cries!
Now, the blood which swells their veins
Flows debas'd by servile chains:
Desart now my country lies;
Moss-grown now my altars rise:
Oh, my troubled spirit sighs
When I hear my people's cries!"

These lyrics simultaneously evince sympathy for oppressed slaves while embodying fears of African savagery unleashed by rebellion and heightened by just resentment. They imply that the very barbarism of the transplanted Africans constitutes a reason to reform or replace the plantation system, and end the importation of fresh slaves from the dark continent, before British arrogance and mismanagement unleash the horrors of black revenge. Their representations of African cult worship suggest at once that the slaves are more advanced than detractors like Long would suggest—possessed of cultural resources of their own, able to form not only insurrectionary plots but a forceful rhetoric of justification for them—and that they nevertheless remain dangerously uncivilized, in need of the Christianization and "de-Africanisation" which only a reformed colonial system might effect (Walvin 55).

Wordsworth and Coleridge's poem "The Three Graves"—inspired (as Coleridge writes) not only by Edwards' account of "*Oby*" but also by accounts of North American Indians—is worth noting although only tangentially related to the issues I am concerned with here. For Coleridge, obeah is principally of "psychological" interest—"a striking proof

26. "Ode. The Insurrection of the Slaves at St. Domingo," reprinted (anonymously) from *The Courier* in *The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1797,* 2nd ed. (London: James Ridgway, 1799) 238–40.

of the possible effect on the imagination, from an idea violently and suddenly impressed upon it"—and the poem is set not in Jamaica but in England, its evil figure not an obi-woman but an incestuous mother-in-law ("instances of this kind are not peculiar to savage or barbarous tribes").[27] Perhaps more closely related to most literary versions of obeah in the period, however, is Wordsworth's "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," written the year after Wordsworth began "The Three Graves" and, like it, employing the traditional English stereotype of the witch (which both Benjamin Moseley and Charlotte Smith relate specifically to obeah) as a vehicle for exploring the "power of the human imagination."[28] Like the West Indian slave, Goody Blake is socially marginalized, the victim of an economic system beyond her individual control; she gains her revenge from a curse which owes its effect—as does in part, in relation to its English audience, a lyric such as "The Negro's Imprecation"—to its capacity for evoking feelings of guilt and to the oppressor's fear of the power of *ressentiment* in the oppressed. If indeed "Goody Blake" owes something to Edwards' account of obeah, whether directly or through Coleridge, it would constitute a particularly subtle and empathetic response, implying that there *is* power in a curse motivated by just resentment, precisely because the psychic (or moral) costs of social tyranny are as high for the master as for the slave. At the same time, the lyric's accommodation of obeah to the English tradition of witchcraft would suggest a deflection of the social issues—slavery, colonialism—it otherwise would inevitably raise, while its psychologized treatment of social oppression could be seen as marking a certain detachment as well.[29]

27. *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,* ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: Oxford UP, 1940) 267, 269.

28. William Wordsworth, "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads,* in *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism,* ed. W. J. B. Owen (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974) 86. For obeah and the traditional European witch figure, see Moseley's remarks on "OBI in England" and on the Salem witch trials (194–95) and Smith's comparison of "Obeahs" to the witches in *Macbeth* (2: 97). See also Alan Bewell's discussion of "The Three Graves" and "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" in *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment: Nature, Man, and Society in the Experimental Poetry* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989) 150–57.

29. The explicit source of the narrative of "Goody Blake" is an anecdote included in Erasmus Darwin's discussion of mania: see Darwin, *Zoonomia; or the Laws of Organic Life,* 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Edward Earle, 1818) 2: 307–8. Somewhat ironically, Shelley caricatures the later Wordsworth's adoption of orthodox Anglicanism as his "conversion to *White Obi*" in the "Dedication" to *Peter Bell the Third*: see Frances Ferguson's interesting discussion of Shelley's remark as a critique of *The Excursion* in *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977) 195–97.

Obi; or, Three-Fingered Jack and Edgeworth's "The Grateful Negro" present the two most extended literary portrayals of obeah in the period. *Obi,* a melodrama sometimes attributed to John Fawcett, was first performed at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, on 2 July 1800 and was staged regularly over the next few decades.[30] The story was taken, with significant alterations and embellishments, from Moseley's *Treatise on Sugar,* published the year before. Although Moseley presents him primarily as a daring robber, in the melodrama Jack is an escaped slave, living as a Maroon, and bent on revenging himself against his former master for savagely beating him and against the white population generally for transporting him from Africa.[31] Whereas Moseley stresses that Jack, despite his "mortal hatred to white men," "was never known to hurt a child, or abuse a woman" (199), in *Obi* Jack's former master, a planter named Ormond, declares that he gave Jack the "signal punishment which . . . drove him to madness" for once daring to "attempt the honour" of his wife (5); later Jack threatens to kill Ormond's daughter, Rosa. *Obi,* like Smith's "Story of Henrietta," appeals to irrational fears of black sexuality as well as of resentment; in Smith's novella, the black rebels are depicted as "savages, always terrible in their passions, and in whom the fierce inclination for European women was now likely to be exalted by the desire of revenge" (2: 114). But Three-Fingered Jack is given a good deal more complexity than Smith's "insurgent Maroons" (2: 104). Jack claims that his murder of Ormond's wife was in revenge for his "beloved Olinda, whom they tore lifeless from [his] arms, as they dragged" him from his "native land"; when about to murder Ormond's daughter, he explains: "the vext spirits of my wife and child hover o'er me, like a holy curse, and claim this due revenge"

30. See Allardyce Nicoll, *A History of English Drama 1660–1900,* vol. 4, *Early Nineteenth Century Drama,* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1955) 311; and The New York Public Library, *Catalog of the Theatre and Drama Collections,* Part III: *Non-Book Collections,* 30 vols. (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1976) 20: 269–70. I have been able to locate two texts of *Obi,* neither definitive: *Obi; or, Three Fingered Jack: A Melo-Drama in Two Acts* (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, n.d. [1800?]), a prompt-book in the Harvard Theatre Collection; and *OBI, or Three Finger'd Jack. A Popular Melo-Drama, in Two Acts,* in *Oxbery's Weekly Budget of Plays and Magazine of Romance, Whim, and Interest* 1 (1843): 93–95. The two texts agree substantially, with numerous disagreements on matters of punctuation, spelling, etc. Citations (by page) follow the prompt-book version unless otherwise noted.

31. A headnote to the *Oxbery's Weekly* version, evidently taken from some account other than Moseley's, describes "Karfa, alias Three-Finger'd Jack, the Terror of Jamaica" as a "Feelop, born in a country bordering on Gambia" who in Jamaica "headed frequent insurrections of slaves" and, when these proved unsuccessful, "fled to the mountains and lived in caves" with his fellow escaped slaves (93).

(9, 23). Reading between the lines, one can even interpret Ormond's story of attempted rape as racist fantasy; Jack shows no interest in raping Rosa when she is his prisoner. When Rosa asks mercy for her captured fiance, Jack replies with sophisticated irony, "You whites are ever ready to enforce for one another that civilized, that Christian law of mercy which our dusky children never yet partook of" (22). In allowing an openly rebellious ex-slave to point up the contradiction underlying European claims to be civilizing and Christianizing Africans by means of a barbaric and unchristian practice, *Obi* goes beyond even works like William Cowper's "The Negro's Complaint" and John Thelwall's "The Negro's Prayer," which stand out as two of the most empathetic and least condescending examples of anti-slavery literature, but which still portray their speakers as passively supplicating rather than as actively seeking retribution; a chained and "kneeling African" was, after all, the official emblem of the Abolition movement.[32]

The play's representation of obeah is equally complex. As in Moseley's account, Jack strengthens his local reputation through giving himself out as an obeah-man: Ormond states, "The negroes dread his incantations, and many of our colour believe him possessed of some supernatural power" (4–5). But in the play, Jack depends on the assistance of an "Obi woman" whose sorcery he himself dismisses as "mummery" (9). Scene three of *Obi,* set in the Obi woman's hut, presents a spectacle of African sorcery, with the black priestess working incantations over Ormond's "image made in wax" in accents reminiscent of the Witches in *Macbeth*:

> Toil him and moil him again and again,
> Sicken his heart and madden his brain;
> Till strength, and sense, and life depart,
> As I tear the last pulse from the white man's heart.
>
> (8)

But if the "Obi charm" (eighteen lines in all) seems calculated to thrill or terrify London audiences, Jack is unmoved—"Thy power is in the fear of thy votaries—and fear I know not" (9). Rather, Jack cynically manipulates the local superstitions which he himself, a materialist,

32. Cowper's "The Negro's Complaint" can be found in *The Poetical Works of William Cowper,* ed. H. S. Milford, 4th ed. (London: Oxford UP, 1950) 371–72; John Thelwall's "The Negro's Prayer" in *The Poetical Register, and Repository of Fugitive Poetry, for 1810–1811* (London: Rivington, 1814) 350–51. For the emblem of the Abolition movement, designed by Josiah Wedgwood, see Blackburn 139.

scorns: "More of your charms, which, in the eye of superstition, make me invincible—and let me to my work" (10).[33] The juxtaposition in *Obi* of a staging of Jamaican witchcraft with its villain's enlightened skepticism may be taken in various ways. It is important to note, to begin with, that contemporary discussions and representations of religious practices found in or traced back to Africa were almost invariably qualified by an urge to dismiss them as "savage" superstitions, since British and other European writers on sub-Saharan Africa and black Africans nearly unanimously declared that African "culture" was too primitive to boast anything that could properly be called religion (Marshall and Williams 242). Thus Moseley introduces his account by noting that "OBI, and gambling are the only instances . . . among the natives of the negro land in Africa, in which any effort of combining ideas has ever been demonstrated" (189); Long reduces "Negroe" religion to a matter of appetite, claiming that Africans are too attached to "their favourite superstitions, and sensual delights" to be Christianized, an index of their "barbarous stupidity" (2: 428–29); for Edwards, Obeah illustrates the "savage and sanguinary" character of the "national manners, wars, and superstitions" of West Africa (2: 62). (It is significant that all of these writers consider obeah a purely African, rather than Afro-Caribbean, practice). In this way, Jack's skepticism could be read as a move to discount any truth-value that might attach to the spectacle of a belief system among African slaves by dismissing it as so much "mumbo jumbo"—to adapt a derisive term for African beliefs popularized in the same period by the explorer Mungo Park. Jack and the local blacks he terrorizes could be seen as exemplifying two different modes of savage behavior: ruthless cunning on the part of Jack, barbaric ignorance on the part of his victims.

And yet here it is an enlightened (and eloquent) former slave who sees through the mysteries of Obi, while "many" of the local whites are taken in. Perhaps Jack is meant to evoke the specter of Jacobin "philosophy" in the hands of insurgent blacks, as in Saint Domingue; perhaps the author is himself a skeptical radical, implicitly undercutting European prejudices even in the act of playing upon them. But if an unusually sophisticated, politically radical sensibility may be intuited at work behind *Three-Fingered Jack,* any effect this might have on contemporary audiences is probably overwhelmed by the play's exploitation of melodramatic conventions and stock characterizations: the sympathetic pa-

33. The prompt-book version reads "make me invisible"; "make me invincible," from the *Oxbery's* version (1: 94), seems the better reading.

triarch (Ormond), the beleaguered heroine (Rosa), the heroic young man (Rosa's lover), the faithful retainers (the slaves who track down and kill Jack in exchange for freedom). It is more likely these elements to which the audience of a popular melodrama would respond than to the occasional hints of a radical critique of slavery and the subtle undermining of racial stereotypes. Jack is, in the end, presented more as a black Iago than as a Jamaican Othello. His defeat on the point of murdering a white woman, and the exposure of the power of obeah (or the superiority of "white obi") which that defeat implies, would undoubtedly appeal to audiences which had lived through the destruction of a British army in Saint Domingue and nervously followed accounts of what Genovese calls the "great Maroon War of 1795–96" in Jamaica (67). In the defeat of Jack and of obi with him, the "Terror of Jamaica" and the "Horror" of Saint Domingue could be symbolically exorcised.

Maria Edgeworth treats obeah derisively in *Belinda,* in a manner which recalls Grainger's *Sugar-Cane,* whereas in "The Grateful Negro" she portrays it much more seriously and in the explicit context of a slave rebellion. In *Belinda,* obeah features in a comic incident involving Juba, the "faithful, affectionate," but "excessively superstitious" black servant who has followed his master, a wealthy young creole named Mr. Vincent, from the West Indies to England.[34] Juba has offended a certain Harriot Freke, who in revenge plays on his "superstitious terror" by convincing him that "one of the obeah-women of his own country" (201) has traced him to Harrowgate in order to take his life. Although Vincent's first response is to "burst out a laughing," he worries that Juba—so much a favorite that he has named his dog after him—will indeed die from superstitious terror: "Mr Vincent knew the astonishing power which the belief in this species of sorcery has over the minds of the Jamaica negroes; they pine and actually die away from the moment they fancy themselves under the malignant influence of these witches" (202). Fortunately, Belinda recalls once seeing a child's experiment in drawing fiery pictures with phosphorous, and guesses that "some imprudent or ill-natured person might have terrified the ignorant negro by similar means"; she has a similar picture drawn in Juba's presence, who becomes, if not altogether enlightened, "convinced that no obeah-woman was exercising over him her sorceries" in the present case. Although Edgeworth establishes her abolitionist credentials elsewhere in the novel by having Vincent recite *The Dying Negro*—a celebrated antislavery poem—to an approving Belinda (317), the obeah incident, a

34. Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda,* ed. Eva Figes (London: Pandora, 1986) 200–1.

triumph of European science and rationality (even at a child's level) over African superstition, evinces the condescending and quasi-feudalistic attitude toward West Indian slaves which she develops more explicitly in "The Grateful Negro."

As a story in *Popular Tales*, "The Grateful Negro" is directed at a lower-class audience at a time when many liberals like Edgeworth felt, in the wake of the French Revolution, that popular aspirations toward a more democratic society must be carefully contained, and the lower classes brought to see their interests as best served not by direct political action on their part but by allowing the rising professional class to act for them. An early example of mass propaganda literature (praised by Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review* for its pacifying effect on a restive populace), *Popular Tales* attempts to channel nascent radicalism into passive support for limited reforms aimed at strengthening the hand of the upper middle-classes.[35] Whereas obeah had been treated ludicrously in *Belinda* for the amusement of a middle-class readership, in "The Grateful Negro" obeah is evoked as the horrific analogue to a slave revolt for the edification of English laborers—at a time when comparisons between West Indian slaves and British wage-earners were becoming frequent.[36] The tale begins by contrasting two Jamaican planters, the dissolute and cruel Jeffries, who tends to gamble his best slaves away, and the patriarchal Edwards, who "treated his slaves with all possible humanity and kindness."[37] Edwards believes in a reformed slave system with freedom phased in only gradually: "He wished that there was no such thing as slavery in the world; but he was convinced, by the arguments of those who have the best means of obtaining information, that the sudden emancipation of the negroes would rather increase than diminish their miseries." His style of plantation management forms an analogue to the program of selective reforms called for by middle-class liberals in England: "He adopted those plans for the amelioration of the state of slaves which appeared to him the most likely to succeed without producing any violent agitation or revolution" (400).

Jeffries' tyranny, on the other hand, has generated a conspiracy among his slaves (led, as usual, by African-born Koromantyns): "Their object

35. Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background, 1760–1830* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981) 62. For Edgeworth's political affiliations, cf. Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789–1830* (London: Longman, 1989) 74.

36. Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985) 3–35; Blackburn 156.

37. Maria Edgeworth, *Tales and Novels*, 10 vols. (London: Routledge, 1893) 2: 400.

was to extirpate every white man, woman, and child, in the island" (405). The head conspirator, Hector, enlists the aid of an obi-woman named Esther, "an old Koromantyn negress" skilled in poison and the display of "supernatural powers"; as the tale develops, it appears that Esther in fact is "the chief instigator of this intended rebellion" (409–10). She administers the "solemn fetish oath" to Hector and his companions, and prepares a bowl of "magic poison" in which the conspirators' knives are steeped as the "sorceress" mutters incantations by the "blue flame of a cauldron" (416–18). Fortunately for the Jamaican whites, Jeffries' "best negro," Caesar (a name which evokes both the conspiracy in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and the abortive slave revolt in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*), is indebted to the paternalistic Edwards, who has saved him from being sold to Mexico and given him a plot of his own to work in his free time. Although a fellow Koromantyn and Hector's "ship-mate" (slaves transported together frequently considered themselves mutually bound for life), Caesar chooses "honour" and gratitude to Edwards over love and friendship for Hector; he betrays the conspiracy despite the obeah-woman's threats and the rebellion is eventually put down (411).

Exploiting well-known associations between obeah and slave revolts, Edgeworth is able to connect revolution with savagery and superstition in a reformist, and implicitly anti-Jacobin, allegory for British laborers. It is significant that in this same period Burke not only compares the French revolutionaries to a "gang of Maroon slaves," but (in his 1796 *Letters on a Regicide Peace*) to "cannibals" as well—one of the first applications of this term beyond its originally Caribbean context (Hulme 265). Jacobin-inspired revolution and the "barbarities of Africa" had also been frequently associated, as noted above, in such accounts of Saint Domingue as Bryan Edwards' 1797 *Historical Survey;* significantly, Edwards begins by opposing the spectacle of class warfare in France to the "progressive improvement in the situation of the lower ranks" in England which only cautious reform can effect, and ends by opposing the sudden emancipation schemes advanced by "detestable incendiaries" who would "preach up rebellion and murder to the contented and orderly negroes in our own territories" to the "slow and gradual" phasing out of the slave trade. "A perseverance in the same benevolent system, progressively leading the objects of it to civilization and mental improvement, preparatory to greater indulgence, is all that humanity can require; for it is all that prudence can indicate" (xix, 193–94). Citing Edwards' history of the West Indies as her guide to obeah, Edgeworth tacitly draws on his connections between white and black Jacobinism, revolution and sudden emancipation, and the "improvement" of the

lower ranks in England and of the slaves in the sugar colonies; it is no accident that her model planter-patriarch is named "Edwards."

Edgeworth's manipulation of the obeah theme to preach counter-revolution and discredit sudden emancipation schemes contrasts markedly with Montgomery's lines on obeah in *The West Indies,* which make part of a condemnation of slavery in the British possessions:

> Tremble, Britannia! while thine islands tell
> The appalling mysteries of Obi's spell;
> The wild Maroons, impregnable and free,
> Among the mountain-holds of liberty,
> Sudden as lightning darted on their foe,—
> Seen like the flash, remember'd like the blow.[38]

For Montgomery, the slave system inherently encourages revolts; the "mysteries" of Obi here emblematize the impossibility of subduing the escaped slaves by force, the Maroons themselves ambivalently portrayed as both "wild" savages and as heroic custodians of liberty encouraging other slaves to rebel in their turn. Montgomery's lines seem at once to acknowledge the function of obeah in facilitating an anti-colonial, Afrocentric social identity among the escaped slave communities—Laguerre calls the West Indian maroons the "initiators of the black power movement" (68)—while lamenting their "appalling" religious beliefs and practices, virtually forced on the more indomitable among the blacks by a short-sighted British policy, as delaying their eventual Christianization and their integration into a "civilized" post-slavery colonial polity.

By the time Montgomery's anti-slavery epic appeared in 1809, however, obeah seems to have lost much of its horrific charge, and had begun to become once more a subject for untroubled laughter. The theater audiences that had been chilled by a melodrama on *Obi* seven years earlier were treated to a burlesque of it in *Furibond, or Harlequin Negro,* a "Grand Comic Pantomime" performed at the Drury Lane Theater on December 28, 1807—significantly, the year in which the abolition of the slave trade was finally enacted.[39] *Furibond,* as much a work of official propaganda as a popular entertainment, self-consciously heralds a new colonial order, in which slavery will be gradually phased out and West Indian blacks slowly raised to junior partnership with their

38. James Montgomery, *The Poetical Works of James Montgomery. Collected By Himself* (London: Longman, 1850) 26.

39. Nicoll 465. Citations (by page) are from *A Description of Furibond; or Harlequin Negro. A Grand Comic Pantomime, Performing With Applause at Drury Lane, Theatre* (London: J. Scales, n.d. [1870?]), consulted in the Harvard Theatre Collection.

British overseers—that is, allowed minimal wages for the same plantation work they previously performed without compensation. The pantomime's first scene, set in "A Plantation in Jamaica," introduces Furibond, "an enchanter who resides on the island" (presumably an obeah-man) who attempts to "solicit the hand of Columbine," a planter's daughter, in marriage, only to be spurned with "great disgust" (5–6). Furibond summons up a familiar spirit named "Maligno" with whom he plots to win Columbine by force, eventually following her and her father, Sir Peevish Antique, back to England. Their efforts are frustrated, however, by a sympathetic though "disobedient" slave, Harlequin, who has earned a fairy wish (in the usual accidental fashion). His first wish is to change his "sable hue" for a white skin, from which the fairy, Benigna, dissuades him: "Wilt thou the pleasures of the mind forgo[?] / I knew thy manly nature would say no" (7–9). Harlequin then wishes "for the emancipation of his fellow slaves," but Benigna responds, "Poor Afric's children sigh for liberty, / Alas!—that task was not reserved for me." Instead, she summons the "Genius of Britain" at whose signal a "figure of Britannia, with her lion, descends from the skies": "England shall stamp the blest decree, / That gives the Negro *liberty*" (9). Harlequin finally chooses a magic sword, which he employs to protect Columbine from the advances of Furibond and Maligno; their enchantments prove powerless against those of Benigna, and both "sink" in the pantomime's closing scene (26).

As *Furibond* attests, by the end of 1807 anti-slavery had again become a popular, even patriotic, cause. In a period of growing demand for political and social reform, abolition—as opposed to Catholic emancipation, electoral reform, or extending the franchise to the middle classes—was the only significant reform considered politically expedient (Anstey 408; Blackburn 313–15). Ending the slave trade could by this time be seen as more detrimental to Britain's imperial rivals than to its own colonies, which were relatively well-stocked with slave labor; it would also end the importation of Africans—widely seen as more violent, indomitable, and unpredictable than "creolę" slaves—to the West Indies (Blackburn 310–11). Haiti, which had declared its independence from France at the beginning of 1803, was now viewed more as an unofficial ally against Napoleon (who had sent an army against it—with British collusion—in 1801) than as an enemy; Wordsworth's 1802 sonnet "To Toussaint L'Ouverture," composed when Toussaint was dying in a French prison, is an early example of British sympathy for the Haitian cause (Geggus 140–43). Moreover, Toussaint was by 1802 no longer a seemingly invincible revolutionary leader, but could be assimilated to the popular anti-slavery image of the dying, chained, or supplicating

slave. As Britain began moving decisively away from slavery and towards a "universal definition of free labor" as the basis upon which to manage its colonial work-forces, the abolition of the slave trade could be celebrated as both sound colonial policy and as a humanistic gesture evincing Britain's moral superiority.[40] *Furibond,* particularly in the figure of Harlequin, suggests how sympathy for oppressed slaves could again be uninhibitedly expressed for an English public no longer troubled by fears of either white or black Jacobinism, the first having been coopted, the second significantly weakened, by Napoleon.

Nevertheless, for all its tone of self-congratulation, *Furibond* remains like *Three-Fingered Jack* a profoundly conflicted text, though for reasons of its own. Benigna's response to Harlequin's wish for a white skin may seem an uncommonly (and unexpectedly) forthright anti-racist gesture, implying that Harlequin's "mind" and "manly nature" are unaffected by his color, but much of the comedy in *Harlequin Negro* depends upon a type of crude racist humor anticipating that of the minstrel shows of the later nineteenth century. The Clown, for example, marries a "black female servant" (6) towards the end of the pantomime who almost immediately presents him with a set of cuckold's horns and a half-dozen bastard children. It is not clear from the text whether Furibond is initially portrayed as black or not (in London he changes his form into that of an English "beau"), but his implicit association with the obeah-man at that time quite familiar to English readers and theater audiences, together with his frantic pursuit of Columbine, suggests an appeal to the racist assumptions regarding black sexuality which surface in texts like Smith's "Story of Henrietta." And yet the "Lovers" who are joined by the benignant fairy at the pantomime's close to the delight (one assumes) of the holiday audience are Columbine and—Harlequin Negro (26). As is the case with *Three-Fingered Jack,* one must ask to what extent audience response to the play is shaped by stock roles, here the commedia dell' arte characters in particular: to what degree is Harlequin's initial presentation as a black slave counteracted by his identity *as* Harlequin, who conventionally wears a black mask?[41] Still, the apparent celebration of

40. Frederick Cooper and Ann L. Stoler, "Tensions of Empire: Colonial Control and Visions of Rule," *American Ethnologist* 16 (1989): 617–18.

41. Henry Louis Gates notes that the figure of Harlequin has been associated with black Africans at least since the late eighteenth century, citing the speculations of Jean Francois Marmontel and Jean Pierre Florian in particular. He also posits a connection between the English harlequinade and the American minstrel show mediated by several harlequinades—including *Furibond*—which "contain figures of the black as Harlequin" and "combine both blackness and minstrelsy." Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987) 51–52.

interracial romance which ends *Furibond* remains quite striking, particularly when contrasted with the disgust which Lamb, for one, attaches to the pairing of a "*coal-black moor*" and "white woman" in *Othello,* and given the effective taboo on sympathetic representations of black and white erotic couplings which would characterize the theater, and later the film and television industries, for the next century and a half.[42]

After 1807, with the exception of the belated appearance of Montgomery's *West Indies,* obeah no longer functions to represent and allay British anxieties regarding "African" power. Obeah is mentioned frequently throughout Matthew G. Lewis' *Journal of a West India Proprietor* (kept in Jamaica from 1815 to 1817), but always as superstitious "nonsense"; Lewis, like Coleridge, views its effects mainly as a measure of the "strength of imagination" among the credulous.[43] As in Grainger's *Sugar-Cane,* obeah is once more taken seriously only when it threatens to rob the planter of one of his slaves (whose value had increased markedly as a result of Abolition): "it will be truly provoking to lose him by the influence of this foolish prejudice" (134–35). Unlike Grainger, however, Lewis cannot imagine integrating the practice into a system of plantation management; he writes that obeah has been "greatly weakened" in the island since his last visit, and hopes it might be altogether eradicated among the blacks by their baptism and conversion to "white Obeah" (95, 148).

Obeah all but drops out of sight in British writing between the publication of Lewis' *Journal* in 1834 and that of Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966. Set principally in Jamaica during the period immediately following the end of colonial slavery, *Wide Sargasso Sea*—Rhys' antithetical reworking of *Jane Eyre*—critically addresses the conventions for representing obeah developed by writers in the decade 1797–1807. Antoinette (Rhys' sympathetic elaboration of Bronte's Bertha Mason), a white creole who has grown up in Jamaica, imagines a scene of obeah such as those displayed in "The Negro Incantation" of *Three-Fingered Jack*: "a dead white man's dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut."[44] The unnamed Rochester figure, who has

42. Charles Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation," *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb,* ed. E. V. Lucas, 7 vols. (London: Methuen, 1903–5) 1: 108. Cf. Coleridge's repeated assertion that Othello is not a "barbarous Negro" but a "gallant Moor" in *Lectures 1808–1819 On Literature,* ed. R. A. Foakes, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987) 1: 55, 2: 314.

43. Matthew Gregory Lewis, *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor, Kept During a Residence in the Island of Jamaica* (London: John Murray, 1834) 138, 353.

44. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: Norton, 1982) 31.

come from England in search of a West Indian heiress, reads a sensationalistic account of "Obeah" in a book called *The Glittering Coronet of Isles: "Voodoo as it is called in Haiti—Obeah in some of the islands, another name in South America"* (107). Rochester rationalizes obeah as a matter of poison but cannot help dreading it all the same; he claims to be writing a book about obeah in order to obtain incriminating information regarding Christophine, the "Martinique obeah woman" who protects Antoinette until threatened with police action and imprisonment (30, 159–60). When Antoinette prevails against her better judgment, Christophine conjures up an aphrodisiac (Rochester's "poison") with disastrous effect. But the narrative voice itself never presumes to represent obeah: rather, the practice (as Christophine intimates) signals what cannot be understood, or fully accepted, or assimilated by the white characters, creole or English: "'So you believe in all that tim-tim story about obeah, you hear when you so high? All that foolishness and folly. Too besides, that is not for *béké*. Bad, bad trouble come when *béké* meddle with that'" (112). In setting the standard Eurocentric approaches to obeah represented by Antoinette and Rochester—demonizing it, outlawing it, eroticizing it, conflating it with other Afro-Caribbean "cults"—against the narrator's refusal to depict it at all (the scene in which Christophine produces Antoinette's love charm is pointedly ellipsed), Rhys effectively subverts the colonialist construction of obeah characteristic of romantic-era writing. In *Wide Sargasso Sea,* obeah represents what resists representation, what eludes containment; it negatively signifies the gulf that separates even a white creole like Antoinette (the daughter of a slave-holder) from the island's black population and its living traditions.[45]

Peter Hulme describes two linguistic strategies available to a colonizing culture when confronting "novelty in experience": "the novelty can be subsumed under a current signifier in an attempt to domesticate it, or it can be marked as novel—and therefore alien—by being given a new signifier, often one adapted from an alien discourse" (95). (The first strategy produces the "West Indies," equating the American sugar islands with the more familiar Orient; the second produces the "Caribbean," region of Carib or "cannibal" natives, who are unassimilable and therefore—implicitly—subject to eradication.) The exotic term "obeah"

45. Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's remarks on Christophine in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *"Race," Writing, and Difference,* ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 271–72.

clearly denotes the practice it signifies as alien, to be banned and rooted out rather than familiarized and contained. Unlike "Caribbean" or "cannibal" or "hurricane," all words with Amerindian roots, however, "obeah" (or "obi," "obia," "orbiah") is a word of African provenance, a corruption of the Twi word *obayi* or *obeye* (Morrish 15–16; Patterson 185). Obeah is marked as doubly alien: both unassimilable to European experience (despite the scattered analogies with English witchcraft), and representing a foreign, "savage" African intrusion upon the partially tamed Caribbean. As a term within the colonialist discourse in which eighteenth and early nineteenth century British writers, pro- and anti-slavery alike, remain enmeshed, obeah signifies the threatening cultural difference existing between European masters and transplanted African slaves, rather than a creolized practice suggesting the interplay of Amerindian, African, and European traditions; Edwards is representative in claiming that "the professors of *Obi* are, and always were, natives of Africa, and none other" (*History* 2: 84).

The insistence upon the African provenance of obeah not only contributes toward its threatening aura, however; it also enables the wishful removal of the threat—political as well as cultural—associated with it. The discursive linking of obeah with slave revolts aligns it with what Long calls the "crafty, treacherous, bloody" character of black Africans, while its status as a superstition, and of its practicers as "pretended conjurerers," suggests that both obeah and the larger threat of black resistance it metonymically evokes can be exposed as futile, empty gestures doomed to fail when met by European superiority, whether in arms or in "civilization" (2: 354, 416). So De Quincey, in the remark quoted at the beginning of this essay, qualifies obeah not only as "African," but as "poor African *Obeah,*" its poverty a reflex of the presumed intellectual poverty of sub-Saharan Africa. An account of "OBEAH TRIALS" included in Edwards' *History* reports that, around 1760, "various experiments were made with electrical machines and magic lanterns" upon some captured "*Obeah-men*"; one, "after receiving some very severe shocks, acknowledged that 'his master's *Obi* exceeded his own'" (2: 92). It is this acknowledgment that every representation of obeah in the British romantic era presses toward, in one manner or another. By playing upon the historical associations of obeah with slave and maroon resistance but stripping the practice itself of any historical context, relegating it instead to the primitive, supine "Africa" or "negro land" of the colonial imagination, romantic writers symbolically exorcise the threat of black self-determination, equating its pursuit with the empty display of a barbaric and vulnerable superstition. Like the practice it

purports to represent, obeah as constructed within colonial discourse raises fears in order to play upon and redirect them. The "master's obi" takes as its materials, however, not blood, herbs, and grave-dirt, but fantasies of "exotic" peoples and fragments of their histories and traditions.

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