EDITED BY

Derek R. Peterson

Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic

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Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic

Edited by Derek R. Peterson

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Series Editors' Preface

The University of Cambridge is home to one of the world's leading centers of African studies. It organizes conferences, runs a weekly seminar series, hosts a specialist library, and coordinates the work of the several dozen Cambridge lecturers whose research concerns Africa. With the generous support of the Leverhulme Trust, the center has recently inaugurated the Cambridge/Africa Collaborative Research Programme. Each year the center announces a fellowship competition organized around a particular theme and invites applications from Africa-based scholars. Four or five fellows are brought to Cambridge for six months, during which time they pursue research on separate projects while meeting regularly to discuss their work. At the conclusion of their tenure, the visiting fellows present the fruits of their labors at two conferences, one in Cambridge, the other at a partner African institution.

This book is the first installment in a new Cambridge Centre of African Studies Series, published by Ohio University Press. The series will publish edited volumes arising chiefly out of the body of scholarship generated by the Cambridge/Africa Collaborative Research Programme. These books will highlight the work that young, promising African scholars have composed and refined over the course of their time in Cambridge. The books will also feature the work of European or American Africanists who have offered papers at conferences and seminars convened in Cambridge. Contributors will have been involved in a yearlong conversation about the themes in which each book is engaged. This long period of incubation will, we hope, allow us to produce books that are both thematically coherent and methodologically innovative, full of fresh, cutting-edge research from scholars who are excited about their work.

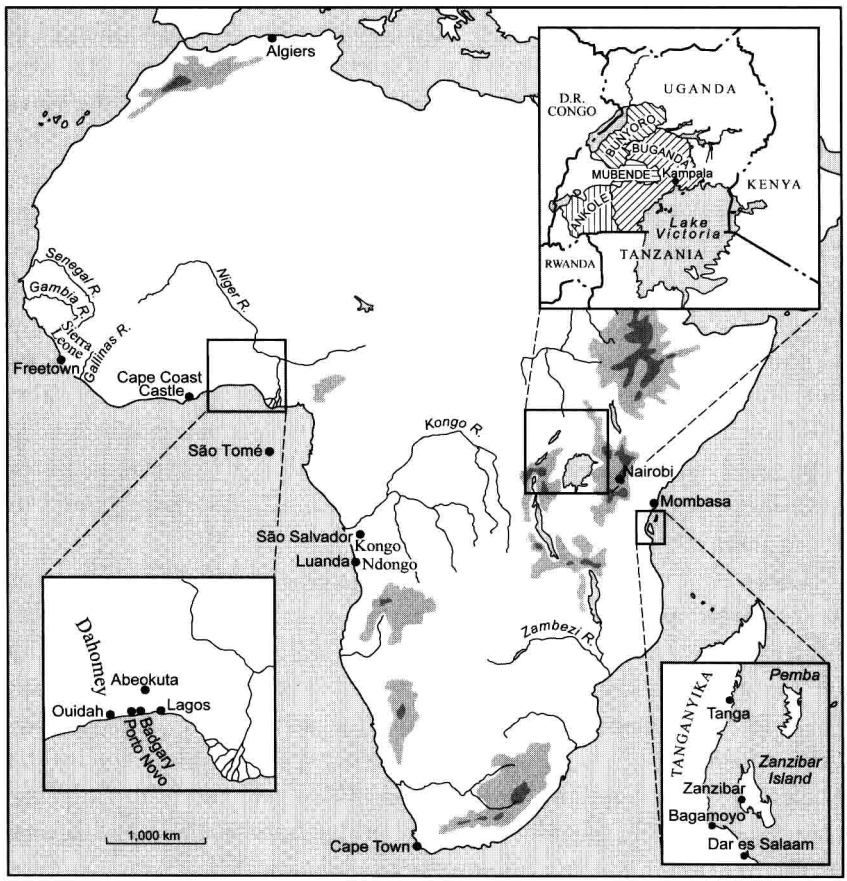
Academic presses today face growing financial pressures, and it is increasingly difficult to find a publisher for the fruit of collaborative research. We thank the editors at Ohio for their support in fostering a more dialogical, more democratic approach to the production of knowledge about Africa.

Derek R. Peterson
Harri Englund
Christopher Warnes
Cambridge, England

Acknowledgments

This book arises out of a series of lectures convened by the Centre of African Studies at the University of Cambridge in 2007. The series was occasioned by the bicentenary of the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which was then being celebrated with much pomp and circumstance by Tony Blair's Labour government. The lectures were meant to focus critical scholarly attention on British abolitionism, to illuminate the broader geographic and temporal terrain in which abolitionism took place, and to claim the study of abolitionism as a field for Africa's historians. The lecture series was supported by the Smuts Fund for Commonwealth Studies and the Centre for History and Economics, both of the University of Cambridge. Cambridge's Centre of African Studies subsidized this book's production. My editorial work has been supported by the Leverhulme Trust, whose Philip Leverhulme Prize gave me relief from the demands of teaching. I am most grateful to these organizations for their support.

I am a historian of colonial eastern Africa. At a time when historians are separated as much by their bibliographies as by their research fields, I have had a great deal of reading to do. In learning the scholarship on the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, I've relied particularly on Rebecca Scott, Seymour Drescher, and the anonymous reviewer from Ohio University Press, all of whom offered welcome guidance on the book's intellectual architecture. Jonathon Glassman and John Lonsdale commented on the introduction. Gillian Berchowitz, the press's senior editor, has been a pleasure to work with. Rebecca Peterson has, as ever, been my most lively interlocutor, and I am most grateful to her.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Cape Town
Nairobi
Mombasa
D.R. CONGO
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BUNYORO
BUGANDA
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Kampala
KENYA
ANKOLE
Lake Victoria
RWANDA
TANZANIA
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Abeokuta
Ouidah
Lagos
Badgary
Porto Novo
1,000 km
TANGANYIKA
Tanga
Pemba
Zanzibar Island
Zanzibar
Bagamoyo
Dar es Salaam

Contents

Introduction

Abolitionism and Political Thought in Britain and East Africa

DEREK R. PETERSON

IN 1931, Zakaliya Lugangwa and sixty-three compatriots wrote to the governor of the British protectorate of Uganda, the Anglican bishop, and the secretary of state for the colonies to complain about the government of Mubende District. Mubende, historically part of the Bunyoro state, had with the backing of British administrators been folded into the kingdom of Buganda in the late nineteenth century. British administrators regarded Buganda's hegemony over the disputed territory as an administrative convenience. Lugangwa and his compatriots, by contrast, argued that Ganda rulers were making them slaves. They catalogued the tyrannies of Ganda government—schools conducted exclusively in the Ganda language, discriminatory rules about land tenure—and cast themselves in a familiar moral drama: "the thing that hurts us most is *Slavery* which has been practiced over us. . . . We wish of the British Government that every country subject to the English Flag should enjoy freedom and that slavery should be done away with. . . . Free us from Bondage in which we are, let us go back to our mother land Bunyoro."[1]

Abolitionism had many advocates in colonial Africa. Activists like Lugangwa used abolitionist language to dramatize the starkly unequal power relations of colonial government and to transform their partisan political interests into a moral problem that demanded attention. In the British mandated territory in Tanganyika, activists of the Tanganyika African National Union drew from rural people's own vocabulary to

characterize the cadre of government-appointed chiefs as *utawala wa kitumwa,* a "slave regime."[2] TANU activists argued that national independence would bring *uhuru,* "freedom," conceived both as political sovereignty and as liberation from slavery. Just to the north, in the colony of Kenya, Kikuyu detainees held in government-run camps during the Mau Mau war were similarly representing their situation in an abolitionist framework. In a 1957 petition to the commissioner of prisons, detainees at the Sanjusi Island camp complained over their paltry rations, the hard work they were forced to perform, and their inadequate clothing. "Now we have learned that instead of being detained, the government has turned us to be slaves," they wrote, "for we are employed in the same work as African slaves were employed in America."[3] In 1954 detainees at the Manyani camp wrote to the secretary of state for the colonies, to Jawaharlal Nehru, and to parliamentarian Fenner Brockway to complain that "the Kenya Government wants to make us its slaves. Would you please inquire this of the British Government of our Queen Elizabeth II to help all people . . . not to be made Kenya slaves."[4]

In Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and other locales, subject peoples were exerting political leverage over local colonial authorities by representing themselves as slaves. There were other roles in which they could cast themselves. In the kingdom of Buganda, for example, the founder of the separatist African Orthodox Church replied to the Anglican bishop's condescension by comparing himself with "Martin Luther, Calvin, Erasmus, [the] Huguenots, Henry VIII, Parker, Wycliffe, Cranmer, King Edward VI . . . Queen Elizabeth, Wolsey, the Protestant Episcopal Church, Booth, the Scotch church, the old Catholic church of Holland," and other advocates for Christian orthodoxy.[5] His contemporaries in the populist Bataka Party sometimes compared themselves with Oliver Cromwell, highlighting their opposition to the powers that Buganda's king enjoyed.[6] African activists drew on a wide range of historical precedents in order to validate their contemporary political projects. But for people confronting the starkly unequal power relationships that British colonialism cultivated, for prisoners, ethnic minorities, forced laborers, and nationalist politicians, being a slave was good politics. Abolitionist rhetoric was, among other things, a means of making political inequalities look unjust. What abolitionist rhetoric did particularly effectively was dramatize petitioners' plight as exploited subjects, suffering under local authorities' tyranny. By positioning themselves in this way, African entrepreneurs obliged British administrators in faraway London to act

in order to uphold British honor. In speaking as abolitionists, Africans on the colonial periphery brought the imperium close to hand.

Historians working within their separate subdisciplines have sectioned off the whole field of moral and political discourse that abolitionist thought supported. There is a vast literature about the politics of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. There is a separate, equally vast scholarship about slavery and emancipation in the Atlantic world. And there is a growing historiography about colonial Africa's intellectual and political life. What these chronological and geographic partitions obscure are the ongoing uses to which abolitionist symbolism, rhetoric, and ideology could be put. The East African activists who filled British officials' mailboxes with petitions about slavery were not contemporaries of Wilberforce or Clarkson. Neither were they actually engaged in the liberation of slaves. But thinkers in anglophone Africa could nonetheless appropriate the discourse of abolitionism in order to lend moral authority to projects that were secular in character. Anglophone Africa's activists knew William Wilberforce, David Livingstone, and other advocates of British abolitionism through the dozens of vernacular-language biographies that missionaries published. Mau Mau detainees ransacked the slim collection of books available from their camps' libraries and found therein accounts of the slave trade and the struggle against it.[7] African politicians in 1950s Zanzibar composed dozens of essays hymning Livingstone, John Kirk, and other abolitionists, using their rhetoric to dramatize the brutalities of "Arab" slaveholders. Abolitionist discourse helped Zanzibar's African activists configure their political situation in racial terms and gave them a grammar with which to reply to Arab elites' cultural condescension (Glassman, this volume). For these entrepreneurs, British history was close at hand. Their chronological remoteness from the eighteenth century did not make it impossible for these thinkers to position themselves as subjects of abolitionist discourse.

The present volume arises out of a lecture series organized at the University of Cambridge to mark the bicentenary of the Act for the Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade. New Labour was in 2007 fighting a deeply controversial war in Iraq, and the Blair government seized on the bicentenary of abolition as an opportunity to stiffen the backs of the British public. The Heritage Lottery Fund disbursed some twenty million pounds to fund public events celebrating abolition. The Royal Mail issued a commemorative coin and a series of stamps. Inspirational biographies describing William Wilberforce's life were published, and a hagiographic film,

Amazing Grace, was released in March of that year (Hilton, this volume). In his November 2006 pronouncement on the bicentenary, Tony Blair publicly expressed his "deep sorrow" at Britain's involvement with the Atlantic slave trade. But against the backdrop of the Iraq war, he also called the bicentenary an opportunity to "increase our determination to shape the world with the values we share."[8] For Blair, the bicentenary was a pedagogic event, an occasion to remind an increasingly skeptical public about imperial Britain's historical role as an agent of civility and human rights.[9]

Abolitionism and Imperialism was conceived as a contrarian effort to challenge the self-congratulatory frame in which the bicentenary of the Abolition Act was being cast. The authors argue that abolition was never a singular achievement for British idealism. They show, rather, that abolitionism was a joint production, authored not by a few British activists but by a cosmopolitan set of actors, working on a disparate set of projects from a variety of positions. The cast of characters was broad. British businessmen were interested in the agronomic potential of West Africa. They promoted free-labor colonies and experimented with crops that might fuel the British economy (Brown and Drescher, this volume). West African rulers, working to keep hold over their polities' demographic and political future, opposed the slave trade where it upset social order (Thornton, this volume). Caribbean planters were in the early nineteenth century experimenting with some of the principles of free labor. The evidence they generated helped abolitionists argue that slave emancipation would advantage the plantation economy (Morgan, this volume). Miners, colliers, and other middling artisans endangered by the inhumane conditions of Britain's new factories put their names to antislavery petitions as an act of protest against industrial capitalism. Working-class radicals identified themselves as "white slaves," and claimed the moral authority of abolitionism for themselves. And parliamentarians worried about the wrath that God was storing up against the British state supported abolition as an act of national absolution (Hilton). For these actors, the moral authority that antislavery conferred assisted projects that were themselves pragmatic. Economic and political entrepreneurs in West Africa, the Caribbean, and in Britain itself hooked into the discourse of abolitionism, using its symbols and its vocabulary to advance their disparate goals. Abolition was formed out of a contrapuntal discourse that crisscrossed the Atlantic.

Seeing abolitionism as a contrapuntal discourse makes it possible to think of the British Empire itself in a new frame: not as a vehicle by which

already-established British values were extended to the unenlightened corners of the world, nor still as a hegemonic imposition on subject peoples' cultural and political autonomy, but as an arena of moral discourse. A new cadre of imperial historians has shed light on what Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler have termed the "tensions of empire," highlighting how, in the transcontinental space opened up by Europe's empires, normative conceptions of religion, cuisine, motherhood, and matrimony were defined and debated.[10] Britain's empire was never simply "out there": it never existed, that is, as a separate political field from Britain itself.[11] During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, actors in the West Indies and in Africa carried on a long conversation with British activists about labor, rights, and freedom. West Indian planters' racism drove patriots like Granville Sharp to clarify British virtues. Free blacks' commitment to Sierra Leone gave abolitionists evidence to prove the viability of emancipation. William Wilberforce's antislavery rhetoric helped inspire a slave rebellion in Barbados. The empire was the crucible wherein British values were worked out.

This book aims to expand the geographic terrain in which the study of abolitionism is normally conducted. At the same time it illuminates the broader temporal field in which abolitionist thought took place. For abolition was never only an event in nineteenth-century legal history. In Britain's twentieth-century empire, Africans took hold over the discourse of abolitionism in order to bridge the metropole with the colony. Imperial government confronted people in Africa and elsewhere with the challenge of exercising influence over a ruling class that was distant from them. But African activists knew the mailing addresses of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society, of Fenner Brockway, Clement Attlee, and other liberals. They identified allies that could be mobilized to act on their behalf and filled their mailboxes with petitions and correspondence. Their political strategies produced lines of political connection that were more varied and complex than the hierarchy of superior and subaltern. Activists in Uganda, Kenya, and elsewhere adopted the posture of slavery by highlighting the inhumanity of local conditions. They thereby configured their political situation as a moral problem and compelled British liberals to pay heed.

Abolitionism and the Making of British Identity

The history of abolitionism has very often been composed as advocacy. The earliest work was authored by Thomas Clarkson, whose two-volume

history appeared in 1808, the year after Parliament passed the Abolition Act. Clarkson pictured the progress of antislavery as a river. It was fed at its headwaters by the influence of John Wesley and Granville Sharp, and it deepened after 1787, when the Quakers, the Evangelicals, and other groups swelled the movement. In Clarkson's imagery the river reached flood stage in 1807, when with popular support abolitionism overflowed its banks and spilled onto the alluvial plain of Britain's political life.[12] Clarkson's hydrological imagery made a tendentious history look inevitable. It put the opponents of abolition outside the main currents of British history. Writing over one hundred years later, the Cambridge historian G. M. Trevelyan followed Clarkson in representing abolition as the outworking of British ideals.[13] On the centenary of Wilberforce's death, Trevelyan claimed that abolition was accomplished because of "the will and conscience of the people of England," not through the "ordinary machinery of party politics." For Trevelyan the legislative triumphs of 1807 and 1833 had established Britain's moral role as a force for good in the world. "Before [Africa's] exploitation by Europe had well begun," hymned Trevelyan, "the most powerful of the nations . . . had decided that slavery should not be the relationship of the black man to the white." He thus argued that mankind had been "successfully lifted on to a higher place by the energy of good men." Trevelyan's contemporary Reginald Coupland spent his long career composing biographies of David Livingstone, William Wilberforce, John Kirk, and other heroes of British abolitionism.[14] "The lives and works of Wilberforce and the 'Saints' are certain proof," Coupland argued, "that not merely individuals but the common will, the State itself, can rise on occasion to the height of pure unselfishness."[15]

At the high tide of Britain's African empire, the historians Trevelyan and Coupland found in the history of abolitionism evidence with which to fortify the civilizing mission. For the architects of empire in the late nineteenth and in the twentieth centuries, it was the abolitionist project that made Britain uniquely qualified to govern its African subjects. Missionaries and other advocates of empire published dozens of works documenting the accomplishments of the heroes of abolitionism. Today, Cambridge University Library holds 133 titles classified under "Livingstone, David, 1813–1873." Titles such as *David Livingstone: The Great African Pioneer* and *David Livingstone: Light-Bearer to Africa* make Livingstone into a standard-bearer of civility.[16] Other books put Livingstone alongside the makers of British history: one is entitled *Heroes*

of the Nineteenth Century: Nelson, Napier, Roberts, Livingstone, and another *Three Martyrs of the Nineteenth Century: Studies from the Lives of Livingstone, Gordon, and Patterson.*[17] But it was not only English readers who were learning about British values through the biographical genre. Africans were invited to apprehend British liberality in the dozens of vernacular-language biographies published by missionary presses. In western Kenya's Luo language, for example, readers of the 1951 collection *Jochir sigendini magadiera* (People who have lived great lives) could learn about David Livingstone alongside Kitty Wilkinson, Mary Scharlieb, Ann Judson, and other Victorian-era philanthropists.[18] As Boyd Hilton notes in this volume, the inspirational tradition of biographical writing persisted to the present. The bicentenary of the Abolition Act, in 2007, saw the publication of no less than eight biographies of William Wilberforce, with titles like *Statesman and Saint, The Man Who Freed the Slaves,* and *The Millionaire Child Who Worked So Hard to Win the Freedom of African Slaves.* The historiography of British liberalism was in its own time composed as biography. Cast as the victory of principle over self-interest, abolitionism was the framework by which Africans and other colonial subjects were taught about their rulers' benevolence.

It was Eric Williams's 1944 book *Capitalism and Slavery* that first punctured the moralistic historiography of abolitionism. Where Coupland and Trevelyan had represented abolition as a victory for idealism over self-interest, Williams attributed the rise of abolitionism to what he called "developing economic forces." Williams argued that the Atlantic slave trade had played midwife at the birth of capitalism, and that capitalism had in turn played pallbearer at slavery's demise.[19] Profits from the slave trade and its allied industries had provided much of the capital that financed industrialization. But by the 1780s, Williams argued, the economy of the British West Indies was in terminal decline, in part because of the loss of the food-provisioning colonies of America. And in England there was a shift in political power, as ascendant industrial capitalists displaced merchant capitalists. The calculus of low profitability and self-interest made it possible for Britain to end the slave trade based on economic, not moral or ideological reasons. "The humanitarians," argued Williams, "could never have succeeded a hundred years before when every important capitalist interest was on the side of the colonial system."[20]

Scholars have filled a library with replies to the Williams thesis in the sixty years since the publication of *Capitalism and Slavery.*[21] Some

intellectual historians, like Roger Anstey, sought to rehabilitate the reputation of British liberalism. Anstey calculated that the small profits earned from slave voyages were not enough to suggest "any positive connection between structural change in the imperial economy and abolition."[22] In contrast to Williams's materialist thesis, Anstey argued that antislavery was primarily the fruit of Christian cosmology, of the "powerful idea of benevolence." "It was mainly religious conviction, insight and zeal which made it possible for anti-slavery feeling to be subsumed into a crusade against the slave trade and slavery," Anstey wrote.[23] In his 1975 book Anstey devoted six full chapters, nearly four hundred pages, to the Evangelicals and the Quakers, illuminating the moral, philosophical, and political dynamics of the abolitionist lobby. Other historians, more focused on economics than Anstey, challenged Williams's argument about the slave trade's role in Britain's industrial growth. Stanley Engerman calculated the contributions that the slave trade made to British capital formation and concluded that the trade could have made but little difference in the financing of industrialization.[24] Historian Joseph Inikori worked through the same statistics as Engerman and published a series of books and articles illuminating the slave economy's crucial role in fueling industrialization. Inikori's 2002 book was a catalogue of statistics and graphs demonstrating that Africans, as slaves and as workers, played a central part in England's economy.[25] Like Williams and Inikori, historian Seymour Drescher argued that the slave trade played a significant role in the eighteenth-century British economy. But where Williams argued that the profits from the trade were in decline by the 1780s, Drescher contended there was no decline in the value of the British slave system until well after the abolition of the slave trade.[26] In the first decades of the nineteenth century, during the height of the abolitionist campaign, regions under British control produced 60 percent of the world's sugar exports and 50 percent of its coffee. It is with this evidence in view that Drescher has termed the abolition of the slave trade "econocide," for by it Britain willfully terminated the most dynamic sector of its economy (Drescher, this volume).[27]

The debate over Eric Williams's thesis made economic history into a politically consequential vocation. In tables detailing the revenues that slave plantations earned, in censuses detailing the earnings of slaving voyages, historians looked for evidence by which either to indict abolitionists as self-interested profit seekers or to exonerate them as self-sacrificing idealists. It was David Brion Davis who first charted a path out of this

impasse by inviting intellectual history and economic history to join hands. Like Williams, Davis linked the rise of antislavery to the rise of capitalism.[28] But where Williams argued that abolitionism reflected the particular financial interests of industrial capitalists, Davis positioned antislavery within the broader intellectual and moral world that capitalism created. In his 1966 book *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture,* Davis focused particularly on the Quakers, who played a key role in legitimating bourgeois social relations. With their evangelical allies, they stigmatized the old, external mechanisms of physical constraint and valorized the internal restraint and self-discipline necessary for wage work. Abolitionists sought to free individuals to make rational choices, about God and about their financial interests. Their agenda reached from the slave plantations of the West Indies to the urban slums of London. The antislavery parliamentarian William Wilberforce was also the founder of the Society for the Suppression of Vice. His contemporary Thomas Chalmers, a clergyman, abolitionist, and devotee of Malthus, argued that statutory poor relief should be abolished so that the poor could be made responsible for themselves.[29] Even as they sought to free West Indian slaves from their physical bondage, middle-class reformers also sought to liberate working-class people from moral bondage and financial dependency. In their philanthropic work as in their antislavery advocacy, they argued that social discipline should arise from an internalized moral order.

Davis's latitudinal study of abolitionists' projects makes it possible to think of antislavery neither as an instrument of capitalists' self-interest, nor still as a movement of self-denying idealism, but as part of a broader reorientation in British economic and social life. In their marriages, in business, in religion, and in philanthropy, British people were in the eighteenth century developing mechanisms to hold each other accountable. This societal emphasis of accountability arose, argues historian Thomas Haskell, out of the organizational demands of commerce.[30] Where in an earlier time promises exchanged between individuals were beneath the notice of the courts, in the late eighteenth century contract law emerged as a discrete field of litigation. English courts compelled parties involved in contracts, whether financial or conjugal, to keep their promises. In their married lives, English people were in the eighteenth century eliminating religious sanctions punishing sexual deviance. Where sixteenth-century moralists had called adultery bestial, eighteenth-century novels and periodicals conceptualized sexual infidelity as a violation of