Hercules Subdued: The Visual Rhetoric of the Kneeling Slave
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Hercules Subdued: The Visual Rhetoric of the Kneeling Slave

Cynthia S. Hamilton

The image of the kneeling slave, designed for the seal of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, then widely distributed as a cameo manufactured and distributed by Josiah Wedgwood became a powerful abolitionist icon. The image has been seen as both one of victimization and one that acknowledges the agency of the slave. While the former interpretation is understandable given the re-configurations of the image within the polemics of the Abolitionist campaign of the nineteenth century, the original image needs to be examined within the context of its construction. For this, it is necessary to explore the classical nature of the figure, particularly the representations and mythic significance of Hercules. These associations are combined with references to supplication as depicted in earlier token books, religious iconography, contemporary treatises on acting, eighteenth century treatises on gesture and rhetoric, and eighteenth century treatises on phrenology, physiognomy and ethnology. It is the complexity derived from such blending that became simplified and limited in later re-presentations where the image is used in conjunction with sentimental appeals to the benevolence of the viewer. As the classical resonances gave way to sentimental imperatives, the changing array of discourses changed not only the context which gave the image meaning, but reshaped the very image of the kneeling slave in subtle, but significant ways. The result provides us with a complex study of the dynamics of visual rhetoric.

Thomas Clarkson’s The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade (1808) credits Josiah Wedgwood with playing an instrumental role in shifting popular sentiments towards abolition. Wedgwood’s financial support for the campaign was not inconsiderable, but his most significant contribution was undoubtedly the now iconic image of the kneeling slave. Exact attribution of the original design is uncertain, for it was presented to the London Committee on 16 October 1787 by a sub-committee charged with designing a seal for the
An image of the seal is inserted in Clarkson’s *History* along with its description:

An African was seen (as in Figure 1) in chains in a supplicating posture, kneeling with one knee upon the ground, with both his hands lifted up to Heaven, and round the seal was observed the following motto, as if he was uttering the words himself, ‘Am I not a Man and a Brother?’

Once approved by the Society, the design was modelled by William Hackwood for mass-production at Wedgwood’s Etruria factory. Both jasper cameos and intaglios were produced and distributed at Wedgwood’s expense; they were also sold. It was these cameos that became the sought after fashion accessories of which Clarkson remarked, that fashion ‘was seen for once in the honourable office of promoting the cause of justice, humanity, and freedom.’ Wedgwood’s slave cameos were inlaid in gold on snuff boxes, turned into pendants and used to adorn bracelets and hair

![Figure 1](image.png)

**Figure 1.** Hackwood’s original sketch for the kneeling slave medallion. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Wedgwood Museum.
pins. Though it is not possible to say exactly how many were produced, it is reasonable to suggest that thousands were made and circulated.\(^5\) Clarkson noted that he had received some 500 such medallions for distribution.\(^6\) A number of requests for the cameos and seals can be found among Wedgwood’s orders for 1788, indicating the rapidity with which they became popular.\(^7\)

It was not long before both the seal and Wedgwood’s cameos made their way to the USA. In February 1788, Wedgwood sent a number to Benjamin Franklin, then President of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery.\(^8\) In November 1788, the *New Haven Gazette* notified the public that the ‘Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade have the following device for their seal – A Negro naked, bound in fetters, and kneeling in a suppliant posture – the motto, Am I Not a Man and a Brother!’\(^9\) The speed with which the image made its way to America is indicative of the close ties quickly established, and continuing between reform communities in the USA, Ireland and the UK.

In 1830, the *Genius of Universal Emancipation* carried information about the activities of the Ladies Anti-Slavery Societies in England and Ireland and noted the receipt of a ‘variety of fancy articles, such as seals, portfolios, albums, workbags, inkstands, workboxes, &c. [that] have been “adapted to anti-slavery purposes” and made use of for awakening the public attention’. The image on the seal was that of a kneeling slave, above whose head appeared the question, ‘Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?’\(^10\) As the Anti-slavery movement grew in the USA during the antebellum period, the image of the kneeling slave became even more pervasive, adorning fire screens, needle bags, plates, stationary, the masthead of *The Liberator* and numerous broadsheets.\(^11\) The resulting commodification of the slave’s image as a protest against the commodification of his human counterpart is not, of course, without irony.

Neil McKendrick has suggested that Wedgwood produced the antislavery medallion for essentially the same commercial reasons that he issued other commemorative commodities. Mary Guyatt points out that while Wedgwood was personally committed to the antislavery cause, he may not have been blind to the commercial benefits of advertising his wares in this way or to the good publicity associated with his benevolent stand.\(^12\) J.R. Oldfield’s contention that Wedgwood’s publicity strategies were in themselves of inestimable value to the campaign is more to the point.\(^13\) A fresh output of cameos in 1792 was timed to coincide with the campaign for parliamentary legislation.\(^14\) Wedgwood offered to pay for an illustration of the kneeling slave to adorn the title page of Fox’s *An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Utility of Refraining from the Use of West India Sugar and Rum* (1792). Requesting a costing for the engraving of the print-block and a print run of 2000 copies, he closed his letter by saying that the job ‘should be done immediately as this pamphlet may be of great use in preparing the people here for petitioning’.\(^15\) Wedgwood’s entrepreneurial acumen helped to ensure that the anti-slavery message had impact.

Wedgwood’s commitment to the cause should not be underestimated. His name is among the subscribers to Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789), and when Equiano was about to depart for Bristol in 1793, he wrote to Wedgwood requesting
assistance in procuring protection from possible harassment by press gangs. In 1793, after the campaign had failed to secure the intended legislation, Wedgwood, while in London, called on William Wilberforce to see for himself the evidence that had already been presented to the Parliamentary committee on the slave trade. He wrote letters to correspondents who requested information or expressed doubts, sending tracts and arguing the case for abolition. And Wedgwood’s son Josiah was active in the abolitionist movement well into the nineteenth century. In a letter to the younger Josiah after his father’s death, Wilberforce referred to ‘the hereditary as well as personal respect’ he entertained for the younger Josiah.

Wedgwood’s cameo and the engraving of the slave-ship Brookes

The Wedgwood cameo is often read in conjunction with two contemporary visual representations. Most often, it is seen as a counterpart to the famous engraving of the middle decks of the Liverpool slave ship, the Brookes. Produced within a few years of one another – the seal of the kneeling slave in 1787 and the copper engraving of the slave ship in 1789 – both were commissioned by the London Committee of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. In his important study of the visual culture of anti-slavery, Blind Memory, Marcus Wood argues that both construct the African slave as a passive victim so traumatized by the Middle Passage that the experience effectively destroyed the cultural memory and identity of the African. The resulting, covert celebration of white power produces, in Wood’s words, ‘the black as cultural absentee, the black as a blank page for white guilt to inscribe’. Wood makes a strong case for this reading with regard to the engraving and models of the slave ship, but gives Wedgwood’s cameo only passing notice, and while he brilliantly deconstructs the visual references for the slave ship, he does not pay the same attention to the cameo. In The Horrible Gift of Freedom, Wood returns to the image of the kneeling slave, but does not alter his interpretation of the politics of disempowerment behind the image.

The greater complexity and attendant ambiguity of the image of the kneeling slave is indicated by readings of the image that ascribe greater agency to this figure. Kirk Savage sees Wedgwood’s medallion as embodying an important shift towards acknowledging the slave’s agency. This image, he suggests, invited sympathetic identification with a man ‘neither crushed by the weight of oppression, nor driven by it to defiance’, prompting benevolent engagement in the slave’s cause. Jean Fagan Yellin contrasts the muscular power of the figure with the vulnerability of the kneeling female slave in later, more explicitly gendered iconography. ‘Though posed as a supplicant’, Yellin notes pointing to the curled toes anticipating movement, ‘he is shown as powerful and athletic; it is not impossible to imagine him bursting his fetters and asserting his freedom’. The sculptor Thomas Ball, who drew on the image for his ‘Emancipation Group’, Yellin notes, saw Wedgwood’s slave as “just rising from the earth” and exerting his own strength to free himself. Thomas Clarkson suggests that in the medallion, the slave is given a voice, ‘uttering the words himself – “Am I not a Man and a Brother?”’ More contemporary critics might see this as
ventriloquizing. Nonetheless, the denial of agency implicit in such readings cannot be accepted absolutely, nor should ascriptions of agency be seen as necessarily naïve. A striking instance suggesting the strength of will implicit in the kneeling slave is provided by Thomas Gray’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831). Turner, the leader of an abortive slave rebellion, and one that had an unusually high death toll within the white community, is described as he appears in ‘the condemned hole’ of prison. Gray presents the man’s chained, bloodstained hands and fiend-like face in terms of his capacity for action, seen here as monstrous:

The calm, deliberate composure with which he spoke of his late deeds and intentions, the expression of his fiend-like face when excited by enthusiasm, still bearing the stains of the blood of helpless innocence about him; clothed with rags and covered with chains; yet daring to raise his manacled hands to heaven, with a spirit soaring above the attributes of man; I looked on him and the blood curdled in my veins.

Such a range of reactions suggest that the figure and the discourses on which it draws deserve closer scrutiny.

The degree of agency ascribed to the kneeling slave has been questioned, but the potency and effectiveness of this image have long been acknowledged. A letter to the Printer of the London *Diary or Woodfall’s Register* dated 4 May 1789 complained of the pamphlets, essays, prints and medals circulated in support of the abolitionist cause which were ‘calculated more to work on the passions and prejudices of the multitude, than to convince the reason of the few’. With reference to ‘poor stigmatized planters and African Merchants’, the correspondent asked, ‘Are we not men and brethren?’ American abolitionists of the nineteenth century reported that visual images caused widespread alarm among the supporters of slavery. ‘Pictorial representations have ever been used with success’, the *Fourth Annual Report* of the New England Anti-slavery Society noted in 1836. The general public, the report commented, ‘are more immediately and thoroughly affected by a picture, than [by] a verbal description.’ Benjamin Franklin responded to Wedgwood’s gift in a letter dated 15 May 1789, saying that he had been distributing the cameos among his friends ‘in whose countenances I have seen such marks of being affected by contemplating the figure of the supplicant (which is admirably executed) that I am persuaded it may have an effect equal to that of the best written pamphlet in procuring favour to those afflicted people.’

The slave cameo and the hope medallion

A less fully explored pairing than that of the cameo and the engraving of the slave-ship *Brookes* is that of the slave cameo with a medallion titled ‘Hope of Sydney Cove’. As with the slave cameo, Wedgwood’s William Hackwood did the modelling for this piece. The medallion of ‘Hope encouraging Art and Labour, under the influence of Peace, to Pursue the Employments Necessary to give Security and Happiness to an Infant Settlement’ was manufactured from clay sent by the naturalist Joseph
Banks from the colony of transportees at Botany Bay.\textsuperscript{30} The design of the medallion was taken from the title page of \textit{The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay} (1789).\textsuperscript{31} The juxtaposition of the two images was not without its ironies, of course, as Deirdre Coleman has pointed out, particularly with regard to the comparisons then being made between the forced transportation of convicts to Botany Bay and the establishment of a colony at Sierra Leone for the repatriation of freed African slaves, sending freed slaves to a location long associated with the depredations of European slave traders.\textsuperscript{32} Such a pairing also complicates the relationship between the engraving of the slave ship and the Wedgwood cameo by introducing alternative versions of a middle passage.

The slave cameo and the Hope medallion were placed in conjunction visually through paired illustrations on a single, otherwise blank page (between pages 86 and 87) in Part I, ‘The Economy of Vegetation’ (1791) of Erasmus Darwin’s long poem \textit{The Botanic Garden} (1789–1791). The Hope medallion is printed above the slave cameo, is larger, has four figures instead of one and has a hint of landscape rather than a plain background. In the Hope medallion, Hope holds the top of an anchor in her left hand and holds out nourishment, a piece of fruit, in her right. A cornucopia spills its contents at her feet. Peace carries an olive branch; Art, a painter’s pallet. Both are female. The final figure of the group, standing at the back is male and dark-skinned. He has a broad, muscular back and powerful legs. Unlike the females, with their figure-shrouding draperies, the labourer’s body is visible. The kneeling slave and the standing labourer face one another in symbolic dialogue. The colour of their skin, their relative nakedness, and their muscularity effectively draw them together as paired, contrasting figures (Figure 2). The text of the poem also places them in relation:

\begin{quote}
Whether, O Friend of art! the gem you mould
Rich with new taste, with antient virtue bold;
Form the poor fetter’d SLAVE on bended knee
From Britain’s sons imploring to be free;
Or with fair HOPE the brightening scenes improve,
And cheer the dreary wastes at Sydney-cove;
Or bid Mortality rejoice and mourn
O’er the fine forms on PORTLAND’S mystic urn. –
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Here by fall’n columns and disjoin’d arcades,
On mouldering stones, beneath deciduous shades,
Sits HUMANITY in hieroglyphic state,
Serious, and pondering on their changeful state;\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

These lines are clearly Darwin’s tribute to his good friend, Wedgwood, and a celebration of Wedgwood’s skill and ingenuity. Wedgwood’s achievement, as described here, is placed beside that of the potters of ancient China and Greece, thus magnifying his accomplishments and making him the beneficiary of an illustrious heritage. But the lines also suggest the ‘changeful state’ of man, implying man’s mortality, certainly,
with regard to the Portland Vase, the explicit referent for the last quoted lines. But the structure of the preceding stanza – ‘whether’, ‘or’, ‘or’ – also suggests a wider applicability. It suggests that man’s social condition is potentially mutable, that the kneeling

Figure 2. Proof-sheet illustrations of the kneeling slave and the Hope medallion from Erasmus Darwin’s *The Botanic Garden*. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Wedgwood Museum.
slaves may become standing labourers. Wedgwood was understandably flattered when sent the poem in proof-sheets. After thanking Darwin, he commented that the ‘slave cameo comes in so well and so extremely apropos where you have placed it, that I should be sorry to have it removed, as I do not see how it can be so well filled up by any other, especially considering it as a companion to the Hope of Sydney Cove’.

The kneeling slave and Hercules

In Wedgwood’s cameo and medallion, the graceful lines of the standing labourer and kneeling slave, the clear musculature of their torsos and limbs, their tranquility of expression and the folds of the drapery covering both figures’ loins suggest that both draw on antique forms, as was Wedgwood’s practice. In a letter dated 28 June 1789, Wedgwood comments on his manner of treating subjects. ‘I only pretend to have attempted to copy the fine antique forms’, he writes, ‘but not with absolute servility’. It was the style, ‘the elegant simplicity of the antique forms’ that guided him and enabled him ‘to introduce all the variety’; this approach, the collector Sir William Hamilton had assured him, was ‘the true way of copying the antique’. One gets an insight into the way Wedgwood worked in notes in his commonplace books. In the 1787 catalogue, #74 is described as ‘Jupiter sitting in the middle of the zodiac, with Mercury, Minerva, and Neptune; cornelian, king of France’s cabinet’. In his commonplace book, Wedgwood speculated ‘no. 74 Jupiter Olympius, with Mars, Mercury and Neptune, will make one independent of the zodiac. The figures will likewise serve to accompany others, so as to compose subjects’. When doing so, it is clear that Wedgwood was aware of the mythological significance of the figures, as his scholarly Account of the Barberini, Now Portland Vase with the Various Explications of Its Bas Reliefs that Have Been Given by Different Authors (1788) demonstrates.

Conviction as to the importance and superiority of classic models was widespread. Indeed, Winkelmann’s influential Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks (trans. 1765), begins with the contention that taste ‘was not only original among the Greeks, but seemed also quite peculiar to their country: it seldom went abroad without loss’. Winkelmann comments that the ‘most eminent characteristic of the Greek works is a noble simplicity and sedate grandeur in Gesture and expression’. He compares the great souls that lie ‘sedate beneath the strife of passions in Greek figures’ to the sea’s floor that ‘lies peaceful beneath a foaming surface’. George Ogle’s Antiquities Explained (1737) is therefore typical in offering the art of antiquity as a model of graceful design. ‘Their attitudes are always well observ’d; their positions well maintain’d; the aspects of their figures pleasing; and their actions graceful’, he wrote.

Here [the artist] will find the true decorum of composition; where every single part, from the admirable disposition of the whole, preserves a distinct and proper character. What choice of beautiful faces, what variety of perfect forms offer themselves to his imitation; whether he consults for single figures, or groups of figures?

Antique gems, Ogle suggested, were a ‘store-house’ of representation.
The Greek models were not just aesthetically pleasing; they were also emblematic. When discussing the bas relief of the Portland Vase, Wedgwood commented that he was persuaded that the figures used by Greek artists ‘were for them a sort of writing or language, the meaning of which was better understood in their time than it is in ours’. In his opening ‘Apology’ to The Botanic Garden, Darwin comments that ‘[m]any of the important operations of Nature were shadowed or allegorized in the heathen mythology’. The Egyptians, he suggests, used hieroglyphic paintings of men and animals to record their insights and discoveries, ‘which after the discovery of the alphabet were described and animated by the poets, and became first the deities of Egypt, and afterwards of Greece and Rome’. Darwin therefore felt justified in employing figures and fables ‘as represented by the poets, or preserved on the numerous gems and medallions of antiquity’. In essence, he was doing in poetry what Wedgwood had done in clay, using the antique imagery as a symbolic language for his own expressive purposes.

Given the highly stylized and symbolically potent nature of classical imagery, the question of what Wedgwood’s models for the kneeling slave might have been is an important one. Fortunately, there is a relative scarcity of kneeling figures in Greek and Roman art. George Richardson’s classically oriented Iconology, or a Collection of Emblematical Figures does not represent either supplication or obedience through a kneeling posture. Richardson describes his allegorical representation of supplication as ‘characterised by the figure of a virgin crowned with laurel leaves’. The female figure he describes ‘holds a basket full of fruits and flowers in her left hand, and with the right she appears to be adorning an altar with fragrant flowers’. He explains that he has taken this image from an antique medal.

In Greek tableaux, figures stand with their legs either straight or bent; they repose, their limbs at various angles; and they are seated, leaning back or forward. Few are placed resting on one knee. Hercules is the exception, though even he is most commonly depicted standing. In astronomy, however, Hercules has been known as ‘the kneeler’ or ‘the kneeling man’ since classical times and is associated with Engonasin. The classical representations of Hercules provide an antecedent for the kneeling slave and a further link between the Hope medallion and the slave cameo. Slave and labourer probably owe their muscular strength, grace and serenity to Hercules. And it is likely that the slave is indebted to Hercules for the curled toes that balance him between rest and action.

Hercules was associated with virtue and strength in adversity. The developed muscles of the figure show that ‘he has been in continual labour and exercise’. His 12 labours are sometimes said to have been completed under compulsion, and to have been designed to bring about his death. Not only does the myth of Hercules, with his adversity and forced labour resonate with the situation of the slave, but the appearance of Hercules is apposite as well. Although he is often depicted naked, kneeling versions often cover his loins with a lion-skin in much the same position as the drapery covering the labourer and kneeling slave. Hercules is described as powerful, but restrained. His head sits upon a thick, brawny neck. His forehead is described as fleshy and lofty. And his hair is seen as a defining feature, tight-curled and close cropped. In Bell’s New Pantheon, the version recounted suggests that Hercules’s life
was ‘made up of difficulties and hardships, from his birth to his exit’. As a result of Juno’s jealousy and scheming, Hercules must serve Eurystheus who was given ‘the power of imposing on him whatever labours he pleased for the purpose of effecting his destruction’.

If the kneeling slave is seen to resonate with the classical image of Hercules, the racial politics of the image shift in interesting ways. The slave’s labours are no longer a sign of debasement, but become a mark of his character, with such labour patiently endured despite his strength and superior capabilities. Agency is built into the very restraint of the muscles, the toes that remain curled and ready for action.

Specific sources for the labourer and slave can be suggested. The visual reference for the Hope medallion would appear to be the Farnese Hercules, standing with one arm and leg forward, a curled hand resting below the small of his back, the posture turning and inclining his body slightly. In the Hope medallion, it is the right rather than the left side that is forward, and instead of having the forward arm draped over the support against which he leans, the arm is doubled to hold a hammer resting on his shoulder.

The classical sources of the kneeling slave are more difficult to pinpoint. A common depiction of the kneeling Hercules is to be found in maps of the constellations such as John Flamsteed’s Atlas Coelestis (1729), where Hercules is depicted as a kneeling figure, club in hand. Like Darwin and Wedgwood, Flamsteed had been a Fellow of the Royal Society. Given the links between Darwin, Wedgwood and Flamsteed through Joseph Wright of Derby and the Lunar Society as well as the close friendship between Darwin and Wedgwood and their shared interest in science, it seems likely that Wedgwood would have been familiar with this book. One also finds illustrations of the kneeling Hercules in George Ogle’s Antiquities Explained (1737): in one, he bends his bow against the stymphalidae (Figure 34) and in another he is subdued by Cupid (Figure 36), but the most striking precursor to the kneeling slave would appear to be the figure of Hercules bearing Atlas’s burden of the heavens (Figure 35). Ogle suggests that this gem was the source of Carracci’s depiction of Hercules in the Palazzo Farnese in Rome.

Various depictions of Hercules were issued by Wedgwood on his ornamental jasper-ware. In his 1787 catalogue, over 30 of the cameos featured Hercules. The figure was placed on numerous seals, bas reliefs, medallions and statuary as well. Among the cameos listed are ‘The Judgment of Hercules’, ‘Hercules Overcome by Love’, ‘Hercules Supporting the World’ and a number of heads of the young Hercules. It is uncertain that Wedgwood possessed a copy of Ogle’s book, but it seems likely that he did given both his interest in antique gems and his penchant for book collecting.

All the best artistic works which were issued from the presses of Rome, Florence, Venice, Bologna, Paris, Amsterdam and elsewhere, at the close of the seventeenth and during the first half of the eighteenth century, were purchased, and laid before his modellers. (Eliza Meteyard, Wedgwood’s first biographer comments)

She notes that Wedgwood’s often repeated instructions to Bentley were, ‘Get books, prints, models and all you require.’
The phrenology of the kneeling slave

Greek art was seen as capturing ‘brain-born’ images of ideal beauty.55 ‘The most beautiful body of ours would perhaps be as much inferior to the most beautiful Greek one’, Winkelmann writers, ‘as Iphicles was to his brother Hercules’.56 Petrus Camper built on this conviction that classical sculpture represented the ideal body when he developed his concept of the facial angle. According to Camper’s treatise (tr. 1794), classical sculpture derived its grace from a facial line of 100 degrees while the average European’s facial angle was 85 degrees; the African’s was calculated as being lower still. Camper linked beauty, facial angle and mental superiority, implying an inherent

Figure 3. Stationary of the Anti-slavery Society used by the Hanley Shelton Association. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Wedgwood Museum.
racial inferiority of those with features characterized as African. Camper’s ideas were widely cited in the nineteenth century by ethnologists and phrenologists and were used to help validate the scientific racism that was becoming respectable.

In this context, the profile of the head of the kneeling slave carries as much significance as his chains and posture. If one studies the physiognomy of the original sketch and the cameo, the classic lines are clearly perceptible, especially when one looks at the profile in the sketch. With regard to the cameo, there is a striking resemblance between the head of the kneeling slave and the head of the young Hercules. The resemblance is particularly striking in a carved gem from *A Select Collection of Drawings from Curious Antique Gems* (1768) which exhibits the same thick, muscular neck, high forehead, hair line and texture.59 The facial features of the sketch and cameo in profile – the flattened nose and thick lips – give the slave a more racially specific identity, while the straight, high forehead retains its classical planes.

Given such politically fraught territory, it is significant that some later representations, such as the image on the stationary of the British Antislavery Society, give the slave a more caricatured set of African features, slighter musculature and a hunched back (see Figure 3). The slave’s weight sits heavily on his shin, giving him less potential to rise unassisted. Indeed, the curled toes appear to be resting sideways rather than supporting his weight. The exotic landscape in which the figure is placed helps to construct him as ‘other’. This is not an uncommon transformation. Nor is it uncommon to find nineteenth-century images of the kneeling slave that change his gender from male to female or that render the slave androgynous (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** An anti-slavery envelope. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Wedgewood Museum.
These images destabilize the complex associations of the original image and open the figure to more sentimental readings.

**The kneeling slave as supplicant**

When commentators spoke of the kneeling slave as supplicant, they were reacting to another set of visual cues built into the image. In addition to classical models, the eighteenth century was heir to other visual languages wherein supplication was widely referenced. Religious images of kneeling figures abounded, of course, but there were also token books in which supplicant, kneeling figures were presented within illustrations for moralizing narratives. The image on the frontispiece for *Pia Desideria: Or Divine Addresses* (1690) contains a kneeling angel looking heavenward in much the same posture as that of the kneeling slave, but with both knees on the ground and hands flattened against one another in a more explicitly prayerful manner. The hands of the kneeling figures in token books sometimes held objects in their hands – a book, a heart – as they gazed heavenward, directing the reader’s gaze to the importance of the object held aloft, just as the viewer’s eye is carried to the manacles on the wrists of the kneeling slave. In the token books, both knees are usually on the ground, however, giving these figures less potential for action.

The eighteenth century was provided with other sources for a visual language of supplication, particularly in treatises on rhetoric and acting. In *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand* (1644), Bulwer speaks of the stretching out of the hands as ‘a natural expression or gesture wherein we are significantly importunate, intreat, request, sue, sollicate, beseech, and ask mercy and grace at the Hands of others’. Clasped hands, with thumbs pointing upward, he comments ‘is an expression importing a transcendency of praise’. Gilbert Austin’s later, influential *Chironomia: or, a Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery* (1806) sought to establish a comprehensive system of notation for categorizing and recording rhetorical gestures. Though Austin’s system was unique, his interest in interpreting the language of gesture was not. The significance of the countenance, bearing, gestures and attitudes had been discussed in treatises on art, acting and on physiognomy. Aaron Hill’s eighteenth-century book, *An Essay on the Art of Acting* (1779), named 10 dramatic passions – joy, grief, fear, anger, pity, scorn, hatred, jealousy, wonder and love. Hill described the recognizable physical manifestations that characterized – and communicated – the presence of each passion. The profile of the kneeling slave, raising his manacled hands, his head thrown back so that his gaze looks up to heaven is a more extreme version of Austin’s Figure 106, described thus: ‘Deprecation advances in an extended position of the feet, approaching to kneeling, clasps the hands forcibly together, throws back the head, sinking it between the shoulders, and looks earnestly up to the person implored.’ The kneeling slave also echoes Austin’s gesture representing ‘Mild Resignation’.

This language of gesture continued to have currency in the nineteenth century. In Henry Siddons’s *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action* (1822) we see the relation of the kneeling slave to representations of ‘Devotion’ as well as to the
posture of ‘Supplication’. ‘The stretching forth and clasping the hands, when we importunately entreat, sue, beseech, or ask mercy’, Siddons explained ‘is the gesture of supplication’. Siddon’s illustration of the posture associated with ‘Adoration’ is also relevant. In the American edition of William Scott’s *Lessons in Elocution* (1814), ‘Admiration’ is seen as a ‘mixed passion’ in which wonder is blended with love or esteem. ‘The eyes are open wide’, Scott explains, ‘and now and then raised toward heaven. The mouth is opened. The hands are lifted up’.

**Rhetorical theories of visual representation**

*Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand* (1644) recognizes gesture ‘as the only speech and general language of Humane nature’ and sees the hand and the head as the two ‘amphitheatres there are in the body, whereon most of these pathetickall subtleties are exhibited by Nature’. As William Cooke notes in *The Elements of Dramatic Criticism* (1775), classical treatises on rhetoric, particularly those of Cicero and Quintillian, treated the subject of gesture at length. The New Rhetoric of the Eighteenth Century also saw gesture as an important component in effective communication. The ‘tone of our voice, our looks, and gestures interpret our ideas and emotions no less than words do’, Hugh Blair wrote in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1790); ‘nay, the impression they make on others, is frequently much stronger than any that words can make’. The ‘expressive look or a passionate cry’, convey ideas more forcibly and effectively than even ‘the most eloquent discourse’. For Blair, tone and gesture were ‘the language of nature’. ‘It is’, he said, ‘that method of interpreting our mind which nature has dictated to all, and which is understood by all; whereas, words are only arbitrary conventional symbols of our ideas and, by consequence, must make a more feeble impression.’

Hugh Blair and George Campbell went beyond the classical rhetoricians by analysing the psychological dynamics of communication and influence. In doing so, they built on eighteenth-century enlightenment philosophy, particularly on the importance of sympathy and the common moral sense that sympathy implied. To convince an audience, Campbell argued in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776), it was not enough to produce logically constructed arguments that stimulated the understanding; the speaker needed to influence the will. ‘To say that it is possible to persuade without speaking to the passions’, George Campbell wrote, ‘is but, at best, a kind of specious nonsense. The coolest reasoner always, in persuading, addresseth himself to the passions some way or other.’

The theorists of the New Rhetoric devoted considerable attention to the question of how emotion was to be excited. And as the phrenologists would later do, they assumed a causal relationship between the presentation of specific types of objects and the production of particular emotions. ‘To every emotion or passion’, Blair noted, ‘Nature has adapted a set of corresponding objects; and, without setting these before the mind, it is not in the power of any Orator to raise that emotion’. When defining the factors involved in emotional engagement, they often chose pity and benevolence for their examples. Campbell sought to identify the factors that heightened the reception of
this emotion. He also noted the gratification that was derived from pity: ‘The very ben-
evolve or wish of contributing to [the sufferer’s] relief, affords an occupation to the 
thoughts, which agreeably rouses them. It impels the mind to devise expedients by 
which the unhappy person (if it is excited by some calamitous incident) may be, or 
(if it is awaked by the art of the poet, the orator, or the historian) might have been, 
relieved from his distress.’ The pitying observers, he notes, can also indulge in the 
self-congratulatory pleasure that attends their awareness of exercising humane 
affections.

Sentimental re-presentations of the kneeling slave

As the reproductions of the image of the kneeling slave multiplied, the image and its 
significance shifted. The blank background of the cameo was filled with images of 
exotic locations or with scenes that positioned the kneeling slave as victim. That 
this re-presentation occurred is entirely predictable, for it conformed to the rhetorical 
thories of eighteenth-century theorists such as Hugh Blair, George Campbell and 
Lord Kames. Indeed, it is these later representations and readings of the kneeling 
slave that help to justify Marcus Wood’s equation of this figure with the engraving 
of the slave ship Brookes, destroying the balanced visual resonances of the original 
and repositioning the kneeling slave as victim.

William Cowper’s ‘The Negro’s Complaint’ (1788) provides a useful example of this 
process, associated as the poem is with the figure of the kneeling slave. Cowper’s 
poem, like the cameo, acknowledges oppression while upholding the dignity and 
agency of the individual slave:

Men from England bought and sold me, 
Paid my price in paltry gold; 
But, though theirs they have enroll’d me, 
Minds are never to be sold. 
Still in thought as free as ever, 
What are England’s rights I ask 
Me from my delights to sever? 
Me to torture, me to task?

Here mental freedom is contrasted with physical servitude. A justification for enslav-
sm is demanded by a rational individual who claims for himself equality and justice. 
Interestingly, when an extract of Cowper’s poem was selected for the title page of Fox’s 
An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Utility of Refraining from the Use of West 
India Sugar and Rum (1792), this balance was lost. When Wedgwood suggested the 
inclusion of an image of the kneeling slave, he told Clarkson that this ‘pathetic figure’ 
would seem to utter the lines from Cowper’s poem. The words placed in the slave’s 
mouth on the title page of Fox’s treatise are not a claim of equality but a lament:

Why did all-creating Nature 
Make the plant for which we toil? 
Sighs must fan it, Tears must water, 
Sweat of ours must dress the Soil.
The selective use of Cowper’s poem is typical of the sacrifice of individual agency to polemical impact in much subsequent anti-slavery literature. One thinks of Susannah Watts’s ‘The Slave’s Address to British Ladies’ (1828), Margaret’s ‘The Kneeling Slave’ (1830) and perhaps most tellingly William Lloyd Garrison’s introduction to a Sonnet of his own composition inspired by Wedgwood’s image. The introduction, ‘Sonnet’, and commentary were published in the *Liberator* in 1834.81 ‘In order to keep my sympathies from flagging’, Garrison wrote, ‘and to nourish my detestation of slavery by a tangible though imperfect representation of it, I have placed on my mantel-piece the figure of a slave (made of plaster) kneeling in a supplicant posture, and chained by the ankles and wrists’.82 When a kneeling slave was displayed at the entrance of an Anti-Slavery Fair in Maine in 1840, the words above his head were not ‘Am I Not a Man and a Brother’, but ‘Let the Oppressed Go Free’.83

The sentimentalized, self-aggrandizing rhetorical strategies that helped to shape later readings of the kneeling slave therefore need to be distinguished, if possible, from the visual references of the original cameo. Originally, the image blended associations of nobility and strength in adversity with those of supplication and veneration. The appeal made by the figure was both secular and pious, an appeal to both God and to the observer. The question, ‘Am I Not a Man and a Brother?’ was asked not only in the context of religious belief, but also within the liberal, humanist context of natural rights. But as the polemical power of the image led to wide usage and re-presentation, the slave and his utterance became a plea – for and of – a disempowered victim. Within campaigns using recognized rhetorical strategies to engage a mass audience, the kneeling slave was reconfigured as an object of pity and gratification that enabled benevolent observers to affirm their own agency, to derive pleasure from their relatively advantaged position and to congratulate themselves on their humane instincts, in keeping with Campbell’s and Blair’s theories of effective rhetoric.

But the dynamics of these later images lose some of the very resonances and tensions that gave the Wedgwood cameo the richness that rivets the gaze. It was the subtlety and complexity of the visual cues encoded in this image that endowed it with a singular teasing power. It is fitting to end by quoting Wedgwood’s lament for the lost knowledge needed to read the classical language of Greek visual representation, for it resonates with our own position in relation to Wedgwood’s cameo:

> In the compositions of the ancients, the actions of the figures being taken from the character which they were supposed to have and which was marked by the particular forms assigned to their condition, the attitudes designed to represent those actions were always dependent upon these forms: accordingly we cannot flatter ourselves with having understood or explained an ancient monument ourselves until we are able to account for the attitudes and characters of the figures. The case is the same with the accessories, none of them was taken at random, there is none of them that ought not to concur in making the subject understood, because there is not one of them that was foreign to it, or that was not founded upon good reasons. He who explains an ancient monument ought to give these reasons, as they were conceived by him who composed it; when the explicator has set forth the reasons of the characters of the figures represented in a monument, the reasons of all the forms that are to be seen there, the reasons of all the attitudes
and of all the accessories which it comprehends, he has resolved the problem; he has exterminated the unknown by substituting known qualities. But we cannot look upon a monument as explained, when the explication does not comprehend all these conditions, when it is not founded upon these principles, when in fine anything remains to be understood; for then it does not include all the data of the problem to be resolved.  

While fully capturing the intentions of the artist in either case is patently unrealizable, it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of the discourses that shaped the reception of the kneeling slave. Not only did the creation of the image have a corporate dimension, but the discourses brought into play could not be set at the point of origin, as Wedgwood’s comment implies. And as the classical resonances gave way to sentimental imperatives, the changing array of discourses changed not only the context which gave the image meaning, but reshaped the very image of the kneeling slave in subtle, but significant ways. The result provides us with a complex study of the dynamics of visual rhetoric.

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Notes

[8] See Meteyard, *Life of Josiah Wedgwood*, 566. See Wedgwood Archive, 19080 and 19085.26. The former item is a transcript of the letter by Meteyard. Requests were also received from agents in France and Germany.
[14] Ibid., 159.
[16] Letter from Equiano to Wedgwood dated 21 August 1793. Wedgwood Archive, 24058–31. Wedgwood did not respond until 19 September 1793, explaining that he had been away from home. 'I hope you will not be in any danger', Wedgwood writes, suggesting that he contact his partner in London, Mr Byerley 'if it should be otherwise'. Wedgwood assures Equiano that Mr Byerley will take the necessary steps to secure protection. Wedgwood archive 18983–26. A broadsheet advertisement soliciting subscriptions for Equiano's *Narrative*, dated London, November 1788, and inscribed to Wedgwood in Equiano's hand reads, 'I pray you to pardon this freedom I have taken in begging your favour or the appearance of your name amongst others of my worthy friends and you will much oblige your humble servant to command.' See item 12632–74.
[19] The Hanley and Shelton Antislavery Society Cash Book indicates both his support and his activities as an agent for the local society who went to London as their representative. Wedgwood Archive, 24784A–32. Letter from Wiberforce to Josiah Wedgwood dated 8 June 1812, Wedgwood Archive, 27774–36.
[21] Marcus Wood's *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010) is, he explains, 'an extended ironic appendix' to *Blind Memory*, and indeed Wood continues to find the kneeling slave an image of disempowerment, a white celebration of benevolence embodying the usurpation of agency by white sympathizers (see, for example, ix, 4, 19).


[29] See Wedgwood Archive, 1359.2, a receipt dated 8 September 1789 paid from Josiah Wedgwood to Wm Hackwood ‘for finishing a Basso [of] the medal of Hope – Peace Labour and Arts 0–10–6’.


[34] Indeed, Darwin expands this thought later in the same canto, one devoted to chronicling the formation of the earth, celebrating its mineral wealth, and suggesting a progression of human achievements, including the progress of liberal humanism and freedom, as evidenced by the American War for Independence, the French Revolution and the campaign to end slavery. This later mention places the kneeling slave in a more explicitly political context:

Hear, oh, BRITANNIA! Potent Queen of isles,
On whom fair Art, and meek Religion smiles,
Now AFRIC’s coasts thy craftier sons invade
With murder, rapine, theft, – and call it Trade!
– The SLAVE, in chains, on supplicating knee,
Spreads his wide arms, and lifts his eyes to Thee;
With hunger pale, with wounds and toil oppress’d,
‘ARE WE NOT BRETHREN?’ sorrow choaks the rest; –
– Air! Bear to heaven upon thy azure flood
Their innocent cries! – EARTH! cover not their blood!


[38] Commonplace Book 1, p. 327, Wedgwood Archive. Wedgwood makes direct reference to the 1787 catalogue here.


[43] George Richardson [attributed to Cesare Ripa], *Iconology; or, a Collection of Emblematical Figures; Containing Four Hundred and Twenty-Four Remarkable Subjects, Moral and Instructive; in Which Are Displayed the Beauty of Virtue and Deformity of Vice. The Figures Are Engraved by the Most Capital Artists, from Original Designs; with Explanations from Classical Authorities*, Vol. 1 (London: G. Scott, 1779), 98 (Figure 178).

[44] See Edward Phillips, *A New World of English Words, or, a General Dictionary Containing the Interpretations of Such Hard Words as Are Derived from Other Languages…* (London: printed by E. Tyler, for Nath. Brooke at the sign of the Angel in Cornhill, 1658): ‘Engonasin (Greek) the name of one of the heavenly constellations, by which figure was represented Hercules kneeling’. By 1720, the seventh edition was published. The explanation of Engonasin had been expanded to explain the Hercules was ‘leaning on his Right Knee’. One can see the connections with Astronomy clearly in ‘Astronomical Geography. The Ancient Constellations’ in John Evans, *A New Geographical Grammar; or, Companion and Guide Through the Various Parts of the Known World*, Vol. 1 (London: Albion Press, 1811) which lists: ‘Hercules, or Engonasin Hercules Kneeling’.


[49] Ogle, Plate XXXV, description, 112. Plate XXXVI also depicts Hercules kneeling on one knee, but with a club raised. One Cupid is clinging to his shoulder, another is before him. This is a representation of Hercules subdued by love.


with a General Account of Tablets, Vases, Ecritories, and other Ornamental and Useful Articles. The Whole Formed in Different Kinds of Porcelain and Terra Cotta, Chiefly after the Antique, and the Finest Models of the Modern Artists, 6th ed. (Etruria: n.p., 1787).

[52] Only a small proportion of Josiah Wedgwood’s books remain at Wedgwood, and no inventory has been preserved.


[54] Ibid., 602.


[56] Ibid., 4.


[59] T. Worlidge, No. 2, ‘A Young Hercules’, A Select Collection of Drawings from Curious Antique Gems; Most of them in the Possession of the Nobility and Gentry of this Kingdom; Etched After the Manner of Rembrandt (London: Dryden Leach, 1768), description is on page 10, illustration is on following unnumbered page. No record of this book having been in Wedgwood’s library exists, but as already indicated, while Wedgwood’s library was extensive, no records of its contents survive.


[61] See Emblem 18, ‘The Giving of the Heart’, in The School of the Heart: or, The Heart of Itself gone away from God Brought Back again to Him, and Instructed by Him. In 47 Emblems (London: Lodowick Lloyd, 1676) and emblem 23 ‘To Learning I a Love should have, Altho’ one foot were in the Grave’, in Choice Emblems, Divine and Moral, Antient and Modern; or Delights for the Ingenious, in above Fifty Select Emblems, Curiously Ingraven upon Copper-Plates (London: Edmund Parker, 1732).

[62] Kames’s Elements of Criticism (1762), Campbell’s The Philosophy of Rhetoric (1776), Blair’s Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1783), and toward the end of the period, Whately’s Elements of Rhetoric (1828).


[64] Ibid., 161; see also diagram, 151.

Siddons, Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action; Adopted to the English Drama: From a Work on the Subject by M. Engle, Member of the Royal Academy of Berlin, 2nd ed. (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1822).

[66] Gilbert Austin, Chironomia: or, A Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery: Comprehending Many Precepts, both Ancient and Modern, for the Proper Regulation of the Voice, the Countenance, and Gesture. Together with an Investigation of the Elements of Gesture, and a New Method for the Notation Thereof; Illustrated by Many Figures (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1806), 489.


[68] William Scott, ‘Elements of Gesture’, in Lessons in Elocution: or, a Selection of Pieces, in Prose and Verse, for the Improvement of Youth in Reading and Speaking (Boston, Isaiah Thomas, 1814), 38–9. See also ‘Veneration’, 36. The text was originally published in Edinburgh in the eighteenth century, but without the essay on gesture, which was added to the American editions.


[73] Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric, 415.

[74] Campbell, Philosophy of Rhetoric, 328.

[75] Ibid., 331.

[76] In addition to Campbell and Blair, see Lord Henry Home Kames, Elements of Criticism, Vols. 1–3 (Edinburgh: A. Millar and A. Kincaid and J. Bell, 1762).

[77] It is telling that in The Horrible Gift of Freedom, later images of the kneeling slave are conflated with the earlier seal. See, for example, 59–61. See also Wood’s discussion of satiric transformations of the image, particularly in the nineteenth century, 78–89.

[78] Cowper’s poem quickly made its appearance in the USA. It was reprinted in The American Museum, or Universal Magazine 10, no. 3 (1791): 22–3 and much reprinted thereafter.


[80] William Fox, An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Propriety of Abstaining from West India Sugar and Rum (London: M. Gurney, 1791).


