

in 1768 he settled with his friends the Unwins in rural Olney. There Cowper became a neighbor of John Newton with whom he coauthored the *Olney Hymns* (1779). The poetry he published afterward, especially his long poem in meditative blank verse, *The Task* (1785), made him the most widely read poet of his generation, an inspiration for Charlotte Smith, Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. Also contributing to Cowper's fame were the handful of short poems supporting abolition that he published in the late 1780s. "The Negro's Complaint"—one of the most powerful of these poems thanks to its unsettling use of ballad form and its self-asserting speaker prophesying divine retribution—was commissioned by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Trade in Slaves. They added the subtitle "A subject for conversation at the tea table" and arranged for thousands of copies to be printed and mailed across England.

The Negro's Complaint

To the tune of "Hosier's Ghost" or
As near Porto Bello lying.

Forced from Home and all its pleasures
Afric's coast I left forlorn,
To encrease a stranger's treasures
O'er the raging billows borne;
5 Men from England bought and sold me,
Pay'd my price in paltry gold,
But though slave they have enroll'd me
Minds are never to be sold.

Still in thought as free as ever
10 What are England's rights, I ask,
Me from my delights to sever,
Me to torture, me to task?
Fleecy locks and black complexion
Cannot forfeit Nature's claim;
15 Skins may differ, but Affection
Dwells in White and Black the same.

Why did all creating Nature
Make the plant for which we toil?
Sighs must fan it, tears must water,
20 Sweat of ours must dress the soil.¹
Think, ye Masters iron-hearted
Lolling at your jovial boards,^o
Think how many backs have smarted
For the sweets your Cane affords.

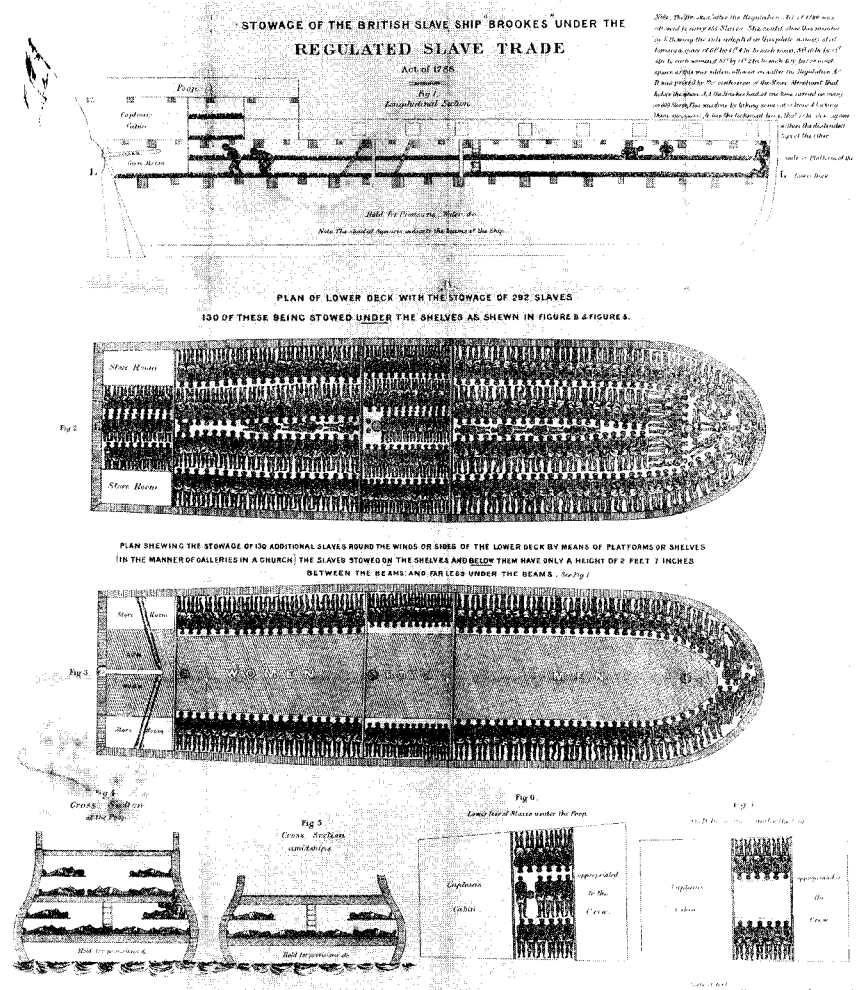
25 Is there, as ye sometimes tell us,
Is there One who reigns on high?
Has he bid you buy and sell us
Speaking from his throne the sky?
Ask him if your knotted scourges,

dining tables

1. "Dress the soil": fertilize it. One thing that makes sugar cane production extraordinarily labor-intensive is that these grasses thrive only with heavy manuring.

30 Matches, blood extorting screws"
Are the means that Duty urges
Agents of his Will to use?
thumb screws

Hark! He answers. Wild tornadoes
Strewing yonder flood with wrecks,
65 Wasting Towns, Plantations, Meadows,
Are the voice with which he speaks.
He foreseeing what vexations
Afric's sons should undergo,
Fix'd their Tyrants' habitations
40 Where his whirlwinds answer—No.



The Slave Ship *Brookes*. This engraving of the plan of a Liverpool-based slave ship, stowed with its human cargo, was published in 1789 by the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Trade in Slaves and made, Thomas Clarkson recalled, "an instantaneous impression of horror upon all who saw it."