

In the Face of Difference: Molineaux, Cribb and the Violence of the Fancy

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Unlike many of its competitors, the *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser* saw the public enthusiasm for boxing—or, the “Fancy”—and in particular the overwhelming interest in the fights between the coal merchant, Thomas Cribb, and the “Baltimore black,” Thomas Molineaux, in 1810 and 1811 as an alarming sign of the “frivolity” of the nation. Complaining that Britons were more versed in the staged bouts between Cribb and Molineaux outside Stratham than in Wellington’s struggles against Marmont on the continent, the editors correctly identified a failure in the public’s comprehension of the scale of the respective conflicts, but themselves failed to understand that the “hammering” doled out in the ring was laden with historical significance beyond the conventional notions of geopolitics. The vast majority of the press was cognizant that something crucial was going on; it is my contention that a thorough examination of the fights as moments of social and cultural performance throws up a number of important historical and methodological questions for the study of race and decolonization in the eighteenth century. The most important of these concerns the differential relation between singular acts of performance and the nascent historicity of performativity itself. What is so remarkable about this example is that the methodological import of the relationship between iteration and present performance is thoroughly entwined with a series of racial problematics which engage questions of “difference” that conventionally stabilize temporal disjunctions in their analysis of identity. Thus two critical paradigms normally at odds with one another have the potential to critique one another fruitfully in this essay. It is my hope that the exploration of differential engagements with temporal issues in performance will open new ways to address questions of social and racial distinction and vice versa.

At one level, the events in question were politically overdetermined. Cribb was widely lauded as not only the champion of Britain, but also as the very epitome of specifically English national character. A large portion of the commentary on the fights turns on very subtle distinctions in ethnicity and there is throughout the papers a latent understanding that his performance reflects on many aspects of what it means to be a Briton in the midst of war with France. This latent pressure put on Cribb’s performance is a direct result of the challenge posed by Thomas Molineaux. Molineaux’s threat to Cribb’s supremacy was palpable: he was an extremely imposing figure and a highly skilled fighter considerably younger than the champion. But the anxiety generated by Molineaux is doubly coded. At some points, the distinction between the fighters is racialized in brutal ways; at others, the distinction is national because Molineaux is repeatedly identified as an American. What is interesting is that these codes are often in direct conflict with each other *and* prone to internal incoherence. For instance, much of the unresolved tension regarding the American war turned on the lack of distinction between Britons and Americans. And there are moments in the first fight, and in the intervening fight with Rimmer, when the “English” fighters are figured as defective citizens and Molineaux accedes to qualities conventionally assigned to Britons. The first section of the essay seeks to untangle these conflicting and conflicted codes in order to show what is at stake in the overall Cribb/Molineaux narrative.

The second section focuses on the repetitive structure of that narrative in order to demonstrate how repetition and performance come together in a particularly resonant fashion in this case

study. I use the word “resonant” advisedly because the narrative structure of the fights replicates a wide array of racialized narratives in the period in which initial reverses in British imperial policy or action are superceded by fantasies of triumphalism. The structure of anxiety and overcompensation is, I believe, crucial to understanding the psychic drive behind not only the representation of these events, but also the durability of the racialized fantasies that are eventually sanctioned by biological state racism.