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‘The extraordinary Negro’:  
Ignatius Sancho, Joseph Jekyll, and the  
Problem of Biography

BRYCCHAN CAREY

For much of the past two hundred years, *The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African*, where they have been considered at all, have normally been read as a footnote to Joseph Jekyll's *Life of Ignatius Sancho*.<sup>1</sup> This short biography, which has prefaced every edition of the *Letters* to appear so far, tells the story of the ‘extraordinary Negro’ who, though born on a slave ship, died comfortably in London, a well-known figure in the literary and artistic circles of the late eighteenth century. It is a story that has fascinated historians and critics alike. Eighteenth-century abolitionists viewed it as proof positive of the humanity and intellectual capacity of Africans.<sup>2</sup> In the twentieth century, Sancho's life provided a reminder that black people had been making a positive contribution to English society for centuries.<sup>3</sup> Yet until relatively recently, most critics and historians who wrote about Sancho followed the lead set by the eighteenth-century review magazines, merely quoting from Jekyll, and in some cases reproducing the entire biography verbatim.<sup>4</sup> Although in the last twenty years Sancho's life story has been explored with increasing frequency and critical sophistication, the letters themselves, with one or two notable exceptions, are still discussed only infrequently. This approach is deeply problematic since, while the *Letters* at least represent Sancho's own idea of himself, Jekyll's biography is unverifiable at best and in places directly contradicts Sancho's own self-representation. Accordingly, this essay has two main theses. First, it argues that many of the ‘facts’ of Sancho's early life, as narrated by Jekyll, are almost certainly untrue. Second, it shows that, since hard evidence about Sancho's nativity and emancipation is unavailable, we can understand the stories we have been given only by reading both the *Life* and the *Letters* in the context of eighteenth-century literary conventions.

Almost every discussion of Ignatius Sancho starts with a condensed version of Jekyll's *Life of Ignatius Sancho*. This biography, a little over twelve hundred words in length, informs us that Sancho was born in 1729 on board a slave ship bound for Cartagena in the Spanish colony of New Granada (now Columbia). It tells us that his parents died soon after: his mother of an unspecified disease and his father committing suicide rather than enduring the horrors of slavery. The young Sancho, Jekyll relates, was baptised by the Bishop of Cartagena and shortly after brought to Greenwich, near London, as

a slave. We learn of Sancho's youthful attempts to learn to read, aided by the duke of Montagu, and we discover how by the threat of suicide – and by the intercession of the duchess – Sancho obtained his freedom. Jekyll recounts Sancho's early fondness for gambling, his abortive attempt at a stage career, and his apparently reluctant return to service, as a butler to the Montagu family. Finally, Jekyll describes Sancho's marriage, his retirement from service to run 'a shop of grocery' in Westminster, and his death in December 1780.

Verifying Jekyll's account is problematic. Vincent Carretta, the foremost authority, laments that 'almost everything we know about Sancho, beyond what is found in his letters, we learn from Joseph Jekyll's brief biography'.<sup>5</sup> This has remained largely unchanged, despite considerable research in recent decades, most by Carretta and by Sancho's earlier editor, Paul Edwards.<sup>6</sup> The few historical documents that have been unearthed tend to corroborate Jekyll's account. For example, parish records show that Sancho was present at a number of ceremonies (including his own marriage and funeral), while the records of the Montagu household confirm Sancho's association with the family. However, the facts these sources reveal confirm what was already public knowledge in Sancho's lifetime. By contrast, few historical documents have emerged that might confirm the more personal details offered in the *Life*, in particular the information about Sancho's birth and early life.

The information Jekyll gives might – in theory at least – be checked against documentary records. To start with, considerable work has been done in recent years to collate records of the journeys made by ships involved in the slave trade. However, the two main relevant projects, Colin Palmer's *Human Cargoes* and the monumental *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: a database on CD-ROM*, both agree that there were no direct slave voyages from the African coast to Cartagena in 1729.<sup>7</sup> This does not settle the matter, as many slaves arrived in Cartagena indirectly, or were brought into the port illegally to avoid taxes but, since Jekyll's account strongly implies a direct voyage, the facts do tend to cast doubt on his story. Likewise, Jekyll's account of Sancho's baptism has not been verified. In theory, baptismal records should still exist at the cathedral in Cartagena. The current situation in Columbia, however, makes a research visit impractical.<sup>8</sup> Although this situation may change, the story still seems implausible. There is no reason why an infant slave should be accorded the honour of baptism by a bishop, or even be baptised at all. Had Sancho then been brought from Spanish America to Greenwich in the early 1730s, itself an unusual journey, we still cannot say much about the three unmarried sisters whom Jekyll claims were Sancho's owners during his childhood. Ann Dingsdale has conjectured that these may have been the Legge sisters, three single women, sisters of the earl of Dartmouth, who lived directly opposite Montagu House.<sup>9</sup> This is plausible, but tells us little about the rest of Jekyll's account.

The problem grows more acute with some of the assertions about Sancho's

later life since many of these are completely unverifiable, or seem to be oddly divergent from what we actually know about Sancho. There is no way we can verify details such as Sancho's 'amour' or his threat to commit suicide since these are not the sorts of things that are usually recorded. Likewise, Jekyll's claim that Sancho attempted to act the parts of Othello and Oroonoko cannot be tested since the attempt came to nothing. Jekyll also tells us that 'the poets were studied, and even imitated with some success; – two pieces were constructed for the stage; – the Theory of Music was discussed, published, and dedicated to the Princess Royal'.<sup>10</sup> While these may yet turn up in some obscure archive, the likelihood is not great. Not only do these pieces no longer exist, but there is no indication that they *ever* existed. Despite searches by several scholars, no advertisement, handbill, abstract, review, or fragment of these supposed publications has ever come to light. Jekyll's inclusion of these elusive writings is surprising since he omits to mention, which was very well known, that Sancho published four collections of music in his own lifetime.<sup>11</sup> It is hard to draw conclusions from omissions, but the suspicion is that Jekyll was either very badly informed about Sancho's literary and musical career, or simply made things up.

We know nothing about Jekyll's source. The most likely possibility is that Jekyll derived most of his information, directly or indirectly, from Sancho himself. However, this assumption is problematic when we take into account Jekyll's apparent ignorance of Sancho's musical career. Jekyll was aged around twenty-three when Sancho died, and had recently arrived back in London after spending time at Oxford and in France. The nature of his relationship with Sancho is unclear and, in fact, we do not know if they ever met. The one piece of evidence – itself not conclusive – that suggests they may have been acquainted is a manuscript letter to Jekyll, apparently written in 1803 from Sancho's son, William. The letter, found in Jekyll's own copy of the 1803 edition of *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho*, printed and published by William Sancho, reads:

To Joseph Jekyll Esq. M.P. From the publisher As a most humble testimony of Gratitude for his great Liberality in Affording His Aid in so handsome a manner & rendering the Life Still more interesting by his corrections. – As a Tribute which by Reason of my Infancy I was unable to acknowledge when he stood forth so very much the Friend of myself & Family. – In very grateful Remembrance of these & other obligations I beg leave to subscribe myself, Sir Your most Humble Srvt. Wm. Sancho.<sup>12</sup>

The 'corrections' would appear to be the footnotes, added to the *Life* in the 1803 edition. William's letter suggests that Jekyll acted charitably towards the family, but the aid that he offered may have been no more than the posthumous composition of the *Life*. However, it would appear from this that Jekyll was at least in contact with the Sancho family in the early 1780s, and that he got some of his information on Sancho's early life either directly from Ignatius Sancho or, more likely, indirectly via Sancho's wife, Anne. (William was just five years old when his father died.) If Jekyll based his biography on

oral accounts from the Sancho family, that in itself would not be any guarantee of accuracy since Sancho himself would have been hard-pressed to corroborate much of it. The stories about his birth, baptism, and his parents' deaths he himself would have received second hand, and these may have been no more than fictions created by those who held Sancho in slavery in his youth. The acting and the theory of music may well have been Sancho's own fantasies. Nevertheless, this does not explain the omission of the musical publications, copies of which Anne, surely, would have had to hand. It begins to look increasingly unlikely that Jekyll had any more than a passing acquaintance with the Sancho family.

If Sancho himself was Jekyll's source, we might expect to find some corroboration in the letters themselves. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Most were written in the last five years of his life, between 1775 and 1780, and were addressed to friends or others with whom Sancho had a prior acquaintance – those, in short, most likely to already know the details of Sancho's personal history. These letters overwhelmingly focus on current personal and domestic events, or allow Sancho to display his private thoughts on public events. Indeed, the minutiae of his later life can be found in considerable detail, allowing us to glean much about the daily life of a middle-class African in eighteenth-century London. We learn, for example, that the Sancho family ate pork on 16 September 1777, apple pie on 11 September 1779, and turkey on the following Christmas Day.<sup>13</sup> Sancho hopes the pet dog, Nutts, is not bitten by fleas in the summer of 1779.<sup>14</sup> His daughter Kitty was ill in the autumn of 1778, and died in the spring of 1779.<sup>15</sup> Events are recorded as they occur, and an event of seeming triviality is often given more weight (or at least greater length) than a tragedy or triumph. On occasion, Sancho recounts his involvement in the sort of public or historical events that have traditionally interested biographers. Of these, events in the last year of his life have attracted the most interest. In September 1780, he writes to Mrs Cocksedge informing her that he cast his 'free vote' in the election of that year in favour of Charles James Fox.<sup>16</sup> This fact, not mentioned by Jekyll, makes Sancho the only eighteenth-century African we know to have voted in a British election. In the same year, Sancho offers, in a number of letters to John Spink, his eyewitness account of the Gordon riots. These letters are vivid and immediate, combining (sixty years before its invention) an almost telegraphic style with a complex structure involving dated and timed paragraphs and convoluted postscripts. 'Government is sunk in lethargic stupor – anarchy reigns' comes early in the morning of 9 June. By half past nine, the letter finished, a postscript is added to say: 'King's-Bench prison is now in flames, and the prisoners at large; two fires in Holborn now burning.' Later in the day, a second letter is dispatched, in which 'the tumult begins to subside'. The letter over, a postscript reports that 'his lordship [George Gordon] was taken at five o'clock this evening'.<sup>17</sup>

As an eyewitness account of a significant historical event, this makes for compelling reading. As a representation of Sancho's personal background, it tells us little.

There was, of course, no reason why Sancho should have mentioned his life story in these letters. Indeed, the famous letter written in 1766 to Laurence Sterne is the single instance where Sancho does provide his correspondent with a biographical sketch. Sancho had not met Sterne at this point and so the letter, in effect a piece of unsolicited fan mail, could have been considered impertinent. In either case, it required Sancho to introduce himself, and so he tells Sterne:

I am one of those people whom the vulgar and illiberal call 'Negurs.' – The first part of my life was rather unlucky, as I was placed in a family who judged ignorance the best and only security for obedience. – A little reading and writing I got by unwearied application. – The latter part of my life has been – thro' God's blessing, truly fortunate, having spent it in the service of one of the best families in the kingdom.<sup>18</sup>

This is hardly a comprehensive autobiography, but is nonetheless a skilful and controlled self-representation. Sancho establishes himself as liberal (educated as well as tolerant) and at least of middling social status. Having shown that he is on a level of equality with Sterne, he provides a sample of racist language and places it in opposition to the polite values which he understands he and Sterne to share. Moreover, he asserts his identity as a black man with economy, clarity and pride. The biographical sketch also provides a narrative of self-improvement, the nearest thing we have to a 'slave narrative' in Sancho's writings. The 'ignorance' required by his first 'family', it is implied, was not all on Sancho's part. The knowing, ironic tone positions both Sancho and the reader (implicitly the author of *Tristram Shandy*) in a position of intellectual superiority relative to the family. Sancho, further distancing himself from this ignorance, then takes full responsibility for his own education, an education which, from this account, appears to have been both solitary and heroic. Finally, he displays his Christian faith and his gratitude towards the Montagu family, strategic manoeuvres in a letter to Laurence Sterne, both a clergyman and a distant relative of the Montagus. Sancho's letter is thus a rhetorical rather than a documentary exercise, telling us more about how he wished to appear than who he actually was.

This self-representation differs in several important respects from Jekyll's narrative. In the first place, Sancho does not tell Sterne that he was born on a slave ship or even that he was ever a slave. (In the eighteenth century, a paid servant might equally speak of being 'placed in a family'.) Sancho does not tell Sterne that his parents died in New Granada, that he emancipated himself by an act of defiance, or even that the duke of Montagu had him instructed in reading and writing. These omissions might be considered trifling, except for the context in which Sancho is writing. This is a letter to

his literary hero, Laurence Sterne, an author famed for his representation of sentimental heroism. Alongside the comedy of *Tristram Shandy*, there is always time for moving stories of the human spirit. Sterne's *Sermons of Mr. Yorick*, especially 'Job's Account of the Shortness and Troubles of Life, Considered', which prompted Sancho's letter, are full of discussion of those, like Job, who triumphed over adversity.<sup>19</sup> It is astonishing, therefore, that Sancho did not want at least politely to allude to the story of his birth and early childhood – unless this was a story of which he knew nothing.

There is some evidence to support this hypothesis. Jekyll tells us that Sancho 'was born AD 1729, on board a ship in the Slave-trade, a few days after it had quitted the coast of Guinea for the Spanish West-Indies'.<sup>20</sup> Sancho, on the other hand, seems clear that he was born in Africa. In 1775, he refers to himself as 'a poor African' in a letter to Lydia Leach.<sup>21</sup> In a letter of 1780 to an unnamed 'Mrs H' he calls himself 'a poor, thick-lipped son of Afric'.<sup>22</sup> He wrote several letters to newspapers using the pseudonym 'Africanus'.<sup>23</sup> These examples could be taken as the assertion of a merely rhetorical identity, or one that acknowledged African ancestry without African nativity. However, in one of his most famous letters, written to John Spink at the height of the Gordon Riots in June 1780, Sancho explicitly declares that 'I am not sorry I was born in Afric'.<sup>24</sup> Again, this could be a rhetorical manoeuvre, but it begs the question why Sancho, if he knew and believed the story about his being born on a slave ship, had not said 'I am not sorry I was born an African'. The sense that Sancho did not know the now familiar story of his birth comes through in one other letter, written to the Philadelphia Quaker Jabez Fisher in January 1778. Fisher had lent Sancho some books about the slave trade, probably those by Anthony Benezet. Sancho's response to reading these is revealing:

The perusal affected me more than I can express; – indeed I felt a double or mixt sensation – for while my heart was torn for the sufferings – which, for aught I know – some of my nearest kin might have undergone – my bosom, at the same time, glowed with gratitude – and praise toward the humane – the Christian – the friendly and learned Author of that most valuable book.<sup>25</sup>

Sancho makes it clear that he has no idea if any of his 'nearest kin' have undergone the horrors of the middle passage. There is no indication that he knows his mother and father to have undergone this journey or, indeed, that he was born into it. The formulation 'for aught I know' reveals Sancho's complete lack of knowledge about any aspect of his early life and strongly suggests that not only his earliest memories, but also the stories told to him about his early life, went no further into the past than his arrival at Greenwich. Jekyll's story about Sancho's birth seems to be a posthumous fabrication; one that Sancho himself had no knowledge of at all. Likewise, much of the rest of the *Life* is equally dubious.

Historians and literary scholars have tended to accept Jekyll's account at face value, simply because they have little else to go on. The paucity of

corroborative information has led many to adopt Jekyll's language as well, and we often note modern scholars using Jekyll's archaic formulations to describe the 'maiden sisters' who enslaved young Sancho, or the 'constitutional corpulence' that killed him. This habit may merely seem lazy, but it indicates a far more fundamental problem in the approach to Jekyll's *Life*. The problem is that, while the *Life* is clearly not reliable as history, it nonetheless remains amenable to textual analysis, and this analysis has not yet been forthcoming. The rest of this essay, therefore, will suggest some approaches to the *Life* that, by placing it in the context of eighteenth-century literary conventions, may help us to understand more of both Jekyll's project and of Sancho's.

One such approach might be to treat the *Life* as a slave narrative. It was not written by a slave, but that does not necessarily exempt it from the genre. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, amanuenses recorded a number of slave narratives from slaves' oral accounts. Narratives such as those by Briton Hammon and Ukawsaw Gronniosaw had appeared within Sancho's lifetime, although there is no evidence that either Sancho or Jekyll had read them.<sup>26</sup> Jekyll's *Life* differs in many respects, not least in that Sancho was perfectly capable of writing his own autobiography, had he so desired. Nevertheless, there are resemblances as well. As with Hammon and Gronniosaw, the narrative of Sancho's life has been set down (and probably re-ordered) by a white writer making 'literature' out of what we must assume was an oral account. As with many other slave narratives, Jekyll's *Life* tells the story of a slave's movement from slavery, through self-emancipation, to eventual prosperity. In common with most slave narratives, anti-racist arguments are articulated. However, while the *Life* contains elements of the slave narrative, this approach is not entirely satisfactory. The *Life* is too short, and too clearly the work of a biographer, to fit into that category. Furthermore, some of its elements strike us as being rather literary, implausible even. Take the following bleak line, for example, which describes how the infant Sancho became orphaned: 'A disease of the new climate put an early period to his mother's existence; and his father defeated the miseries of slavery by an act of suicide.'<sup>27</sup> And compare it with the story of Sancho's self-emancipation: 'Enamoured still of that liberty, the scope of whose enjoyment was now limited to his last five shillings, and resolute to maintain it with life, he procured an old pistol for purposes which his father's example had suggested as familiar, and had sanctified as hereditary.'<sup>28</sup>

Presented with a stark choice, Sancho dead or Sancho free, the duchess of Montagu consented, according to Jekyll, to employ the young man and by so doing release him from the clutches of the Greenwich sisters. We have seen how little of this can be corroborated by reference to any other source and so it is noteworthy that there is a marked symmetry in the two stories, a symmetry only partly alluded to by Jekyll. Both father and son, in Jekyll's account, defeat the miseries of slavery by an act of actual or attempted

suicide. Suicide by slaves was not uncommon in the eighteenth century, and there are numerous accounts of slaves, both individually and in groups, throwing themselves into the sea rather than enduring the horrors of the middle passage and plantation slavery. For Jekyll, however, the suicide and attempted suicide are also rather convenient unifying structures within the narrative.

The part played by suicide in the *Life* becomes especially problematic when we recall that the act of suicide by a slave had, by 1782, become a set-piece in works of literature as varied as Aphra Behn's prose fiction *Oroonoko* (1688), Addison's essay on education in *The Spectator*, no.215 (1711), and John Bicknell and Thomas Day's narrative poem *The Dying Negro* (1773). The noble Oroonoko's attempted suicide (he is revived and later executed) is well known, as is the double suicide recounted by Addison. *The Dying Negro* is less familiar, but possesses some remarkable similarities with the story Jekyll tells about Sancho. The Greenwich sisters, we are told, threatened to return Sancho 'to his African slavery'. The slave in Bicknell and Day's poem is actually being returned to plantation slavery. The poem, based on a true story which appeared in London newspapers in May 1773, is given added poignancy by the fact that it had the previous year been declared illegal for slaves to be returned to plantation slavery against their will.<sup>29</sup> This judgement, made by Lord Mansfield in the case of James Somerset, had attracted a good deal of attention in the press. Ten years later, it was no longer in the news, but would still have been relatively fresh in the minds of the reading public. This in itself would have been enough to persuade Jekyll to draw attention to the threat made to Sancho by the Greenwich sisters and, clearly, the similarities between Sancho's situation and that of the slave in Bicknell and Day's poem would have been apparent to many.

Perhaps more significant in the minds of many readers would have been the marked similarities between the character of Ignatius Sancho and the character of the Dying Negro. In their poem, Bicknell and Day had created what Sancho, at least in his writing, actually was: a sentimental African. *The Dying Negro* is a suicide note in verse in which the slave gives vent to his feelings at being torn from the woman with whom he has fallen in love, as well as being torn from the country in which he now wishes to stay. The slave wins the love of the English woman by his ability to communicate in the then fashionable mode of sensibility:

Still as I told the story of my woes,  
With heaving sighs thy lovely bosom rose;  
The trick'ling drops of liquid chrystal stole  
Down thy fair cheek, and mark'd thy pitying soul;  
Dear drops! upon my bleeding heart, like balm  
They fell, and so on my wounded soul grew calm.<sup>30</sup>

An obvious comparison can be drawn with Othello, who won the heart of

Desdemona by telling her the story of his life. Having heard fragments of that tale, she asks him to tell the full story. 'I did consent', Othello tells the Venetian Senate:

And often did beguile her of her tears,  
When I did speak of some distressful stroke  
That my youth suffer'd.<sup>31</sup>

The Dying Negro does the same thing, using his eloquence to create a sympathetic response in his audience of one. Othello's 'distressful strokes' are incidental to his main narrative, and he is quite clear that he is telling 'the story of my life', but the Dying Negro, as part of the eighteenth-century cult of distress, has a far tighter focus, telling 'the story of my woes'. This marks him out not only as an eloquent speaker, but also as a 'man of feeling'; that peculiarly eighteenth-century phenomenon of a man who both interprets and communicates with the world through the medium of his own emotions. Whether he was such a man or not, Ignatius Sancho certainly had pretensions in that direction. Indeed, as Markman Ellis has shown, Sancho's *Letters* are 'sprinkled with many of the most privileged terms of the sentimentalist's rhetoric'.<sup>32</sup>

While Bicknell and Day created an eloquent and sentimentalised African, neither Sancho's eloquence nor his devotion to sentimentality were in much doubt to anyone who took the trouble to read the *Letters*. Those who did would have seen the connection between the two at this level as being as significant as the fact that both used suicide or the threat of suicide at the point at which they were threatened with a return to plantation slavery. This can be stated quite strongly. By 1782, there were very few literary representations of either free or enslaved Africans, and most that did exist tended to typecast Africans as noble savages. Bicknell and Day's poem was one of the first pieces of literature in which an attempt (if not a very successful one) was made to represent an African as a rounded and feeling character. Nine years later, with the appearance of Sancho's *Letters*, a second text became available in which an African, this time in his own words, showed that he was a man of eloquence and a man of feeling. Jekyll's strategy is therefore a dual one. He promotes Sancho's near suicide to a central position (the story takes up four of the nine paragraphs which comprise the narrative part of the *Life*) and by so doing strongly allies Sancho with the sentimental Dying Negro. The relationship works backwards as well. A reading of Sancho's letters indeed confirms that he is a sentimentalist. Sancho thus can be held up to prove the 'truth' of Bicknell and Day's poem – and the strong feelings of slaves threatened with a return to the plantations. By this strategy Jekyll buys into the success of a reasonably well-known poem, but also signals that the *Life* can be read as much for its literary as for its historical significance.

Perhaps the most obvious feature of the text, if not the most discussed, is that it is a short example of a particular literary form: the biography. Indeed,

it is an example of a particular model of biography. In a manuscript note in the flyleaf of Jekyll's own copy of Sancho's *Letters*, we are informed that 'Dr. Johnson had promised to write the Life of Ignatius Sancho, which afterwards he neglected to do, and it was accordingly written by Mr. Jekyll in Imitation of Dr. Johnson's Style'.<sup>33</sup> This tells us that Sancho was well enough known, and well enough thought of, to be considered a worthy subject for the pen of the eighteenth-century's most celebrated biographer. It also tells us that Jekyll was interested in buying into the popular success of Johnson's best-selling biographies. In addition, there are also important implications derived from the Johnsonian project itself, and how Johnson envisioned the role and purpose of the biographer. Johnson's views on biography are made clear in a number of places in his critical writing, views that were put into practice in his many biographies. Amongst these, the most famous were *The Lives of the Poets*, a series of biographical essays which had begun life as short prefaces to a collection of English poetry, but which had blossomed into a lengthy and detailed work of critical biography. They appeared in a complete edition for the first time in 1783, a year after Sancho's *Letters* were published, but in fact had appeared in instalments during 1779-1781. Jekyll's *Life* was therefore written at the height of Johnson's popularity as a biographer. It is no surprise, therefore, that Johnson's model, whether or not Johnson actually ever planned to write a life of Sancho, was the one to which Jekyll turned. In fact, Jekyll had more than the model of *The Lives of the Poets* to go on. Johnson had written up his thoughts on the theory of biography in a number of places, the best known of which is in *The Rambler*, no.60. The theory of biography outlined here, insofar as it is relevant to Jekyll's *Life*, can be resolved into two main arguments. First, he challenged the notion that the biographer should merely praise his subject, arguing that:

There are many who think it an act of piety to hide the faults or failings of their friends, even when they can no longer suffer by their detection; we therefore see whole ranks of characters adorned with uniform panegyric [...] If we owe regard to the memory of the dead, there is yet more respect to knowledge, to virtue, and to truth.<sup>34</sup>

Jekyll takes this advice to heart, sharing with us a number of incidents in Sancho's life which might have been omitted in a panegyric. We learn about Sancho's attempted suicide, his gambling, his affairs, his self-indulgence, and his 'profuseness'. Jekyll clearly follows the Johnsonian model in this respect. Subtler, however, are the implications of Johnson's argument that biography serves a moral purpose because it displays the essentially uniform nature of the human condition. 'No species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography', he tells us, 'since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition.'<sup>35</sup> This insistence on the universal application of biography is central to the Johnsonian view. Biography is both delightful, because it gains our interest

by showing us how similar we are to other people, and useful because it inculcates the morally humbling notion that great and small are all the same before God. 'There is such a uniformity in the state of man', Johnson argues, 'that there is scarce any possibility of good or ill, but is common to all mankind.' Later in the same long passage he concludes that 'we are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure'.<sup>36</sup>

There are some echoes of this universalising philosophy in Jekyll's *Life*. One such is the quotation from *The Holy State*, a work published in 1642 by the Cambridge divine Thomas Fuller. In Jekyll's version, Fuller had referred to Africans as 'God's Image, though cut in Ebony', a clear endorsement of the view, by no means universal in 1780, that people of all races were equal before God.<sup>37</sup> However, the main resemblance to Johnson's model is structural. Jekyll organises the *Life* into three sections. The first is a narrative of the life of Sancho, the second a discussion of his character and achievements, while the third part, which includes the Fuller quotation, generalises from the other two to provide a lesson in anti-racism. The strategy is clear. Jekyll shows Sancho to be an ordinary man (even if an 'extraordinary Negro'). He is shown to have achieved much while at the same time his failures are not disguised. His strengths (epistolary talent, rapid and just conception, wild patriotism, and universal philanthropy) are balanced by his weaknesses (indulgence, dissipation, profuseness). He is cut down by gout and 'a constitutional corpulence', showing that like everyone he is finally humbled by his own mortality. He is, in short, a man like any other.

Johnson, though a lifelong opponent of slavery, had not constructed this model of biography as a weapon against the slave trade. Rather, we might suppose that his anti-slavery derived from his belief in the universality of human experience. Nevertheless, Jekyll is clearly aware of the potentialities of the Johnsonian model of biography and, in the *Life*, applies Johnson's method to the task of proving, through Sancho's example, that Africans are no different to any other human beings. Contemporary readers did not have the benefit of knowing that Johnson had intended to write Sancho's biography, nor that it was written in imitation of his style. This information only became public in 1968. The fact that it was not written by Johnson and that it was written by someone who valued Johnsonian biography is, however, evident in the text. The final paragraph argues that:

He who surveys the extent of intellect to which Ignatius Sancho had attained by self-education, will perhaps conclude, that the perfection of the reasoning faculties does not depend on a peculiar conformation of the scull or the colour of a common integument, in defiance of that wild opinion, 'which,' says a learned writer of these times, 'restrains the operations of the mind to particular regions, and supposes that a luckless mortal may be born in a degree of latitude too high or too low for wisdom or for wit.'

'That wild opinion' was one held by John Milton who, it appears, felt that the strength of his abilities was dependent on the season or the weather. The learned writer who takes issue with this belief is Johnson, in his *Life of Milton*, one of the first and one of the most popular of his biographies.<sup>38</sup> Through Johnson's words, Jekyll is able to critique the geographical determinism, not only of Milton, but also of thinkers of considerable stature including Montesquieu and Hume.<sup>39</sup> By weaving Johnson's words into the conclusion of his text he signals his respect for Johnson but also his debt to him. More cleverly, he has selected a piece of writing which his audience would have known well and, by quoting it out of context, has provided it with a specifically anti-racist spin which its author might not have recognised (although he would probably have approved). Jekyll has anchored the *Life* in the Johnsonian thesis that biography shows the similarities of human beings rather than the differences between them. This approach, in the hands of Jekyll and later of the abolitionists, becomes a powerful tool of eighteenth-century anti-slavery and anti-racism. Moreover, it shows that Jekyll was alert to the possibilities of his chosen literary form: Johnsonian biography, sentimental poetry and perhaps even early slave narratives can all be said to have influenced the way he constructed his biography. Sancho scholars, too, need to be alert to these possibilities. The challenge for future readers of Jekyll's *Life of Ignatius Sancho*, then, may be less one of verification and more one of critical analysis.

## NOTES

1. Except where otherwise stated, all quotations from both Jekyll's *Life of Ignatius Sancho*, and *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho*, will be taken from *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, An African*, ed. Vincent Carretta (London 1998). The *Life* is at p.5-9.

2. See, for example, Peter Peckard, *Am I Not a Man? And a Brother? With All Humility Addressed to The British Legislature* (Cambridge 1788), p.19, in which Sancho is recognised as a 'rational and moral writer', and Thomas Clarkson, *An essay on the slavery and commerce of the human species, particularly the African, translated from a Latin Dissertation, which was honoured with the first prize in the University of Cambridge, for the year 1785* (London 1786), p.175, in which Clarkson argues that Phillis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho provide 'proof' of the 'abilities' of Africans.

3. Peter Fryer, for example, whose *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London 1984) discusses Sancho in exactly this context at p.93-98.

4. See, for example, *Monthly Review; or, Literary Journal* 69 (1783), p.492-97 and *Critical Review: or, Annals of Literature* 57 (1784), p.43-48.

5. Carretta, 'Introduction' to *Letters*, p.ix.

6. *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho*, facsimile with an introduction by Paul Edwards (London 1968); *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho*, ed. Paul Edwards and Polly Rewt (Edinburgh 1994).

7. Colin Palmer, *Human Cargoes: The British Slave Trade to Spanish America, 1700-1739* (Urbana 1981), p.103-105; *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM*, ed. David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson and Herbert S. Klein (Cambridge 2000).

8. Despite my best efforts by post and e-mail, I have so far been unable to interest any Columbian academics in this minor detail of history.

9. Greenwich Education Services, *Ignatius Sancho: (1729-1780) Life and Times* (London 1998), Teaching Pack, section 2.4.

10. *Life*, p.5.

11. All of which are in Josephine Wright, *Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780) An Early African*

Composer in England – the Collected Editions of his Music in Facsimile (London and New York 1981).

12. *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho*, ed. Edwards and Rewt, p.268-69.
13. *Letters*, p.97, 177, 195.
14. *Letters*, p.170.
15. *Letters*, p.144, 154.
16. *Letters*, p.235.
17. *Letters*, p.220-23.
18. *Letters*, p.73.
19. 'Sermon X: Job's Account of the Shortness and Troubles of Life, Considered', *Sermons of Mr Yorick*, 2 vols (London, R. and J. Dodsley, 1760), ii.73-105.
20. *Life*, p.5.
21. *Letters*, p.67.
22. *Letters*, p.216.
23. *Letters*, p.82, 144. See also an additional letter in Vincent Carretta, 'Three West Indian Writers of the 1780s Revisited and Revised', *Research in African Literature* 29, 4 (Winter 1998), p.73-86.
24. *Letters*, p.219.
25. *Letters*, p.III.
26. For these and other eighteenth-century slave narratives, see *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Lexington 1996).
27. *Life*, p.5.
28. *Life*, p.6.
29. This report appeared in at least three newspapers: *The Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* 253 (28 May 1773), *The General Evening Post* 6181 (25-27 May 1773), and *Lloyd's Evening Post* (26-28 May 1773).
30. John Bicknell and Thomas Day, *The Dying Negro, a Poem* (London 1773).
31. *Othello*, I.iii.
32. Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge 1996), p.63.
33. *The Letters of Ignatius Sancho*, ed. Edwards and Rewt, p.268.
34. Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, 3 vols, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven and London 1969), no.60, i.318-323, p.323.
35. *Rambler*, p.319.
36. *Rambler*, p.320.
37. Thomas Fuller, *The Holy State and the Profane State* (Cambridge 1642).
38. Samuel Johnson, 'Life of Milton', *Lives of the English Poets*, 3 vols, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford 1905), i.84-200, p.137-38.
39. Their theories on climate and national character are discussed in David Hume, 'Of National Characters' (1748), *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis 1985), p.197-215, and Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), part 3, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge 1989), p.231-333.