The second half of the eighteenth century was “a difficult time for European imperialism,” perhaps especially as that international system was supported by slave labor in the New World. Communities of escaped slaves harassed their Dutch rulers in Surinam from the 1770s onward; slave rebellions periodically rumbled across Jamaica for most of the century, including a plot uncovered in 1769 in which a group of Kingston slaves allegedly planned to burn the city and kill all the white inhabitants; and most sensationally, in 1791, slaves in Haiti began a revolt that culminated in the overthrow of French rule and the establishment of the world’s first independent black republic.

For the purposes of my discussion here of the economic context of class and racial representation in George Colman’s 1787 comic opera *Inkle and Yarico*, these imperial crises must also include the American Revolution. The revolution disrupted the global triangle trade that had shipped slaves from London to the Caribbean and U.S. ports and sent rum and sugar from the Caribbean islands to U.S. mainland and back to London; it shattered the Caribbean economy. With virtually all the islands’ arable land devoted to raising sugar cane, the West Indies were dependent on British North America for most of their necessities, from grain, lumber, and livestock to butter and soap and candles. And as the political conflict between the North American colonies and England intensified after mid-century, the economic position of the islands grew increasingly tenuous. Such actions as London’s closing of the port of Boston may have been intended as a punitive political response to increasing North American demands for
greater independence in trade, but it also inevitably threatened the Caribbean colonies’ survival. The international dimensions of the conflict, in which the French navy and American privateers challenged British naval dominance and interfered with shipping between England and the Caribbean (where France maintained its own sugar colonies), added additional pressure, causing severe inflation as well as starvation among slaves in islands such as Barbados, the setting for Colman’s play. The revolutionary war so damaged the plantation system in the islands—closing markets and stifling the flow of goods and human chattel—that it never recovered.3

The contexts of Colman’s *Inkle and Yarico*—immediately understood by its late eighteenth-century audience as an antislavery play4—thus include this realization of slavery’s loss of profitability (Barbados was particularly hard hit) and the increasing sense of slavery’s political illegitimacy in an age of revolution.5 With knowledge of the profits, social impact, and moral consequences of slavery resonating from the New World across the Atlantic to Europe and back again, the play stands as a document of the eighteenth-century transatlantic history, tracing lines in a web of economic collapse and social shame. Yet, turning from this grim social history to Colman’s play and to the long literary tradition of which it is part, one is immediately struck by the contrast between such tragic knowledge and the tone of the dominant genre in which the *Inkle and Yarico* story was retold for eighteenth-century consumption.6 Overwhelmingly—with the glaring exception of the first place the *Inkle and Yarico* story appears in, as we shall see—the authors of new versions of *Inkle and Yarico* chose to retell it as a sentimentalized love story primarily illustrating faithless men’s betrayal of the innocent women who love them.7

Mary Louise Pratt points us toward the ideological functionality of sentimentalism as a way of comprehending Britain’s experience with the lands and nonwhite peoples of Asia, Africa, and the Americas, particularly after the trauma of the Haitian Revolution, whose violence shocked and challenged antislavery sympathies across western Europe.8 In this chapter, I will maintain that the sentimental triumph of true love over commercial instinct that Colman’s play celebrates is powerfully inflected by the realization that the economic juggernaut that was the Barbadian sugar industry would soon grind to an almost complete halt. The emergence of sensitive feeling in a character who enters the play as an unfeeling capitalist enables the textual invocation of “conjugal love as an alternative to enslavement and colonial domination.”9 That the love affairs in Colman’s *Inkle and Yarico* are miscegenous as well as merely romantic—Inkle falls for the Indian