John Vanderlyn in Paris: A Reconsideration of *The Murder of Jane McCrea* (1804)

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

John Vanderlyn (1775–1852) was the first American artist to study in Paris (1796–1801). This choice set him apart from his American peers, who trained almost exclusively in London, and influenced his artistic development during the social, intellectual, and political transitions of postrevolutionary France. Vanderlyn’s first attempt at the high art of history painting was *The Murder of Jane McCrea* (1804, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford), which won placement at the prestigious Louvre salon exhibition that year. The painting was one of ten illustrations commissioned for *The Columbiad* (1807), an epic poem about the history of America written by Joel Barlow (1754–1812), an American who lived in Paris from 1788 to 1804. *The Murder of Jane McCrea* was the only illustration Vanderlyn completed. By December of 1804, Barlow had chosen the English painter, Robert Smirke (1752–1845), to complete the commission.

The extent to which Vanderlyn and Barlow discussed their individual artistic goals is not known, yet both men worked within the accepted norms of late-eighteenth-century neoclassicism, and both professed a strong desire for the United States to prioritize an alliance with France over Britain as their new country established diplomatic policies. Barlow used *The Columbiad* to forward a pro-French alliance, and in the preface to *The Columbiad*, he expressed his intent to consider the moral implications of political actions through fiction. Scholars have found in Vanderlyn’s *The Murder of Jane McCrea*
dramatization of an imagined scene of captivity and murder in the American Revolution as well as symbols of discrimination in the history of race and gender in America and an example of academic neoclassicism fused with romantic motifs. The standard interpretation of Vanderlyn’s *The Murder of Jane McCrea* assumes that Barlow’s melodrama of the actual murder is distilled as a statement of anti-British propaganda and that Vanderlyn’s primary artistic resources are from the canons of academic classicism. My argument is that Vanderlyn’s primary aim with this painting was to establish his own reputation as an American painter of merit in France. In working toward that end, he departed from the spirit and intent of Barlow’s poem and drew on the French political environment and images from French popular culture as source materials. Examining Vanderlyn’s painting in terms of the French cultural and political context, as well as the American one, sheds new light on *The Murder of Jane McCrea*. 
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family.
Acknowledgments

Numerous friends and colleagues deserve my gratitude for encouraging me to write about Vanderlyn. It is a pleasure to acknowledge at least a few of them. Professor Mathew Herban first suggested the topic and guided my early research. Professor Barbara Groseclose expertly advised me as I developed my research goals and wrote several drafts. The staff of The Senate House Museum in Kingston, N.Y., gave me access to the Vanderlyn papers, and Eleanor Nance made the trip affordable and enjoyable. The History of Art Department Graduate Studies Committee and Professor Howard Crane supported my petition to complete this work. I will always be grateful for the steadfast support and encouragement of my parents, Carole and Jim Rosing, Ann Bremner, and Michael Spicer. Most of all, I give sincere appreciation and love to Claire Nance Lloyd for her inspiration and patience while I wrote and rewrote these words.
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In John Vanderlyn’s painting *The Murder of Jane McCrea* (1804, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford), two muscular Native Americans restrain a young woman in a wooded setting (fig.1). The man on her right grasps her arm and raises an ax in his right hand, frozen in an upward movement, elbow bent. The viewer can easily imagine the swing that will drive the ax into the upturned face of the young woman who kneels below him. The other man holds her light brown hair close to her head with his left hand. In his right hand, the handle of what we assume is another ax can be seen, ready for gathering the trophy scalp. In the distance, beyond a thick tree trunk in the middle ground, we see the tiny figure of a man in soldier’s attire, running, perhaps, to rescue the woman. A diminutive size, he is a long distance away, and he is also separated from the woman and her attackers by a stream that he must ford. It appears impossible that he will reach the scene in time to stop the violent attack, and the viewer’s immediate comprehension of the inevitable tragedy increases the intensity of empathy and pain felt when viewing the small painting (oil on canvas, 32 1/2 x 26 1/2 inches).

Vanderlyn’s painting imagined a scene on July 27, 1777, when, as the legend goes, a young American woman named Jane McCrea (1753–1777)¹ set out to meet her American Loyalist fiancé, David Jones (n.d.), as his regiment neared the region in which

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¹ The spelling of Jane’s surname varies from source to source. In this paper, the spelling is the same as that adopted by the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, CT, which owns the Vanderlyn painting.
she lived. Jones served under General John Burgoyne (1722–1792) in his campaign to
capture the Hudson River Valley for Britain during the American War of Independence.
The various accounts of her fate—some ostensibly factual, others frankly fictionalized—
all end the same way: Jane is captured and killed by British-paid Native Americans from
the Mohawk tribe. The story of the captivity and murder of Jane McCrea, an American
colonist, by British mercenaries was a catalyst for rallying the patriot militia to victory at
the Battle of Saratoga three months later, and that victory has long been interpreted as the
spark that encouraged France to come to the aid of the new nation in its fight for
independence.

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independence.

The Murder of Jane McCrea was the first painting of what was to be a suite of ten
illustrations for The Columbiad, a book by Joel Barlow (1754–1812), published in

2. Historic and literary sources refer to the Native Americans as “Indians,” and in
most instances specify the Indian nation to which they belonged as the Mohawk tribe. One
of the Native Americans is referred to by the proper name LeLoup but is also called
Wyandot Panther. For variations on the McCrea history, see Rupert Furneaux, The Battle of
Mohawks in the following line: “Two Mohawks met the maid,—historian, hold!” therefore
Native Americans in the Vanderlyn painting will be identified as such in this paper. Joel
Barlow, vol. 2, eds. William K. Bottorff and Arthur L. Ford. (Gainesville: Scholars’
Facsimiles & Reprints, 1970), Book Six, 653.

3. In the 18th century, American colonists who supported independence from British
rule were known as American Whigs, revolutionaries, rebels, and patriots. In opposition to
the patriots, colonists who remained loyal to British rule "...but maintained the rights of the
colonies as political units of the [British] empire..." called themselves Tories. After 1774,
Tories began to call themselves "Loyalists." New York (State) State Historian, The
American Revolution In New York: Its Political, Social and Economic Significance
(Albany: The University of the State of New York, 1926), 206. I have chosen to use the
terms “patriot” and “Loyalist” throughout my thesis, unless I am referring to a person of a
particular political party, and in that case, I will refer to the person’s party affiliation.
Philadelphia in 1807. Barlow, who was a lawyer, businessman, and politician from Redding, Connecticut, is best known for his keen interest in, and books and essays on, politics and literature. The story of McCrea’s murder, included in Book Six of The Columbiad as a fictitious account of two characters named Lucinda and Heartly, is an example of Barlow’s interest in documenting the political environment and its moral implications through fiction.

John Vanderlyn (1775–1852) was an artist born in Kingston, New York. In a time when an American artist’s merit was based on European standards and American artists trained almost exclusively in London, Vanderlyn traveled to Paris to study (1796–1801). He accepted the commission for The Columbiad during his second stay in Paris in 1803 and quickly turned it into his first opportunity to paint an original subject from history.

The Murder of Jane McCrea, with its rich array of visual and literary source material and empathetic characterizations, provides one of the earliest and most far-reaching narratives in American art history, yet few historians have discussed the painting and it has been equally overlooked in the past decade. In my opinion, however, it is a useful illustration for scholars examining captivity narratives and the history of race and gender in America during the revolution and a vivid example of Vanderlyn’s dexterity with European sources from ancient sculpture and academic painting. The Murder of Jane McCrea has


most often been discussed as a stand-alone American painting that demonstrates the intersection of Vanderlyn’s French academic training during the waning era of neoclassicism with emerging romantic elements of tragedy and terror. I suggest that, in addition to its primary subject of murder in the American Revolution, Vanderlyn’s depiction of the story may carry a secondary meaning linking its iconography more closely, if incompletely, to the book it was meant to illustrate and to the country in which it was painted.

To be sure, much of the literature on Vanderlyn discusses *The Murder of Jane McCrea* in the context of the artist’s biography and his training in France.\(^6\) We read also that the McCrea murder occurred near Fort Edward, New York, and that Vanderlyn’s family home in Kingston, New York, one hundred miles south of Fort Edward, was destroyed during the Burgoyne campaign, leading one to conclude that his motive to focus first on the McCrea narrative in *The Columbiad* was a natural decision emerging from his personal history.\(^7\) The literature also emphasizes how the painting reveals Vanderlyn’s academic

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training, especially by listing the numerous references he made to antique sculpture and to paintings from eighteenth-century academe that were the most celebrated of the time.  

Historian Samuel Edgerton’s speculation about the iconography of the painting is most prominent and pertinent for this thesis. Focusing on the tiny figure of McCrea’s would-be rescuer, i.e., her fiancé David Jones (Heartly in the Barlow poem), Edgerton theorized that Vanderlyn “made a concession to the French political climate changing Heartly’s English red coat to American blue.” Edgerton’s view that Vanderlyn removed the tragic element of McCrea’s entanglement with a British sympathizer to simplify the story for the viewer is supported in most literature about the painting published after Edgerton’s article in 1965.

This change may seem insignificant, but in fact it completely alters the meaning of the painting, as now both Heartly and Lucinda are seen as American patriots, and the line between virtue and evil is clearly drawn. The painting is no longer simply literary illustration, but pointed propaganda. Certainly, to both French and American audiences, the murder of an American heroine by Indians in the British service was more poignant than the irony of the actual event, in which the British officer saw his Tory fiancé murdered by his own mercenary allies. 

(March 2009): 93-112. Engels and Goodale, professors of communication and American Studies, analyze the Jane McCrea legend as “the national narrative of revenge as an act of loyalty, patriotism, and submission.”


The figure of the soldier in the distance is only of minor importance to the painting’s composition; the uniform announcing his allegiance is a barely recognizable symbol, a matter of only a few brushstrokes. Yet to interpret Vanderlyn as emphasizing the anti-British aspect of McCrea’s story makes sense, particularly since his account was painted at a time when U.S. relations with Britain were strained, and France was once again at war with Britain after the expiration of the Treaty of Amiens in 1803. Therefore, according to Edgerton, identifying Jones/Heartly as an American soldier emphasizes the anti-British connotation of the painting.

Since Edgerton’s article was published, most interpretations of the painting have followed his lead. William Townsend Oedel, in his 1981 dissertation on Vanderlyn, opens speculation that the artist’s iconography might have symbolism related to French politics, that is, Vanderlyn’s painting may be a metaphor that condemns Napoleon’s rise to power (i.e., the Native Americans symbolize Napoleon’s greed and power, and Jane symbolizes citizens). Oedel ultimately dismisses the idea of metaphor, however, with the following argument, which concludes with firm support of Edgerton’s interpretation:

While this [French] interpretation of the painting is possible, and while subliminal influences (such as the guillotine imagery) certainly may have informed Vanderlyn’s conception, it is not possible to document such secondary levels of meaning. The traditional view of the painting as anti-British propaganda remains the most reasonable and instructive interpretation. Vanderlyn himself clarified his intention by changing Heartly’s uniform from British red to American blue (emphasis mine).11

New insights to Vanderlyn’s iconography have come to a halt, but some authors since the early 1990s have vaguely modified the diametric good v. evil/America v. Britain framework

11. Ibid., 256, note 100.
based on new ways of interpreting the political role and symbolism of both women and Native Americans. In her book on captivity narratives, June Namias questions the soldier’s identity as Jones/Heartly as well as his American or European nationality, yet her interest is in regard to Jane McCrea’s story in women’s history, and she stops short of defining Vanderlyn’s iconography. Art historian Frances K. Pohl calls the Vanderlyn painting “a symbolic narrative of nationhood,” wherein the Native Americans are “actors along the ever-changing frontier,” and McCrea is a symbol of the colonial women and the threats they (and the nation) endured. In contrast to the powerful Native Americans, Pohl refers to the “ineffectual” small figure of Jones/Heartly as the symbol of “European manhood.” In their article exploring the McCrea narrative’s understory of revenge, published in 2009, Engels and Goodale cite Edgerton’s interpretation as definitive, although their article also indicts Native Americans as the focus of the nation’s revenge.

This thesis will attempt to add an alternate point of view to the standard critical interpretation of the painting. In particular, and as proposed, I will bring to light several new observations and resources that have not been addressed in previous publications on The Murder of Jane McCrea. My argument is that Vanderlyn, as an illustrator, may have departed from the spirit of Barlow’s poem and its intention to convey a “political” and “moral object.” Vanderlyn’s The Murder of Jane McCrea promotes his and Barlow’s mutual interest in the documentation of American history and the rise of American international cultural prominence, but Vanderlyn also employs the essence of the French


political environment as he seeks to establish his reputation as an American painter of merit in France.

Vanderlyn’s Formative Years

John Vanderlyn’s early academic education and artistic training followed the artistic heritage of his father and grandfather. His Dutch grandfather, Pieter Vanderlyn (1687–1778), was a self-trained artist who emigrated in 1718 to Kingston, a Dutch colony on the Hudson River, via Curaçao in the Dutch East Indies. Dutch settlers from Albany first settled Kingston in 1652 and purchased the colony from the Esopus tribe of the Delaware nation in 1653. Kingston provided Vanderlyn with a political heritage that valued independence from Britain. Local farmers provided George Washington with food during the revolution, and a small stone house in Kingston would later be the meeting place of John Jay and other patriots who established the first New York State Senate in September 1777. John’s father, Nicholas Vanderlyn (1723–1810), made a living as a glazier, a house and sign painter, and a “dealer in oils and colors.”

At the Kingston Academy, John’s studies of Latin and French, as well as his exposure to ancient Greek and Roman history and classical literature through translations of Cicero, Pliny, and Plutarch, would provide a valuable foundation for the neoclassical training he received in Paris. At the age of seventeen, John was apprenticed to Thomas Barrow (n.d.), an importer of fine prints and


framemaker in New York City. The apprenticeship allowed him free time to enroll in the Columbian Academy art school founded by Scottish-born painter Archibald Robertson (1765–1835).16

The story is told that the celebrated painter Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828) left his portraits of Egbert Benson (1746–1833) and Aaron Burr (1756–1836) to be framed at Thomas Barrow’s shop, and Vanderlyn copied them. His work was noticed, and Burr sent him to become Stuart's assistant in Philadelphia between the summer of 1795 and spring of 1796, a particularly busy phase in the older painter’s career. Vanderlyn prepared the neutral blocking called “dead coloring” for canvases destined to be replicas of Stuart’s Athenaeum portraits of George Washington (fig.2).17

When Vanderlyn was ready to study in Europe, Burr, then a senator from New York, suggested and paid for Vanderlyn’s training in Paris, remaining his patron for nearly eight years. Vanderlyn set off for Paris in 1796. The move to Paris at once set Vanderlyn apart from other American fine art painters, most of whom chose to study in Britain, and introduced him to a growing community of American diplomats, intellectuals, and special envoys resident in Paris and numbering in the hundreds in the


1790s. His European connections would define him artistically and politically for the remainder of his life.

For two years, he studied in the atelier of painter François-André Vincent (1746–1816) until Burr’s patronage lapsed due to financial difficulties. In a letter to his older half-brother, Peter (1758–1802), Vanderlyn explained his choice to work with Vincent, stating that he was “esteemed as a painter on a footing with David…though in respect to character his superior.”

Vincent’s oeuvre demonstrated an acclaimed ability in neoclassic theory and style, as could be seen in, for example, Zeuxis choisissant pour modèle les plus belles filles de la ville de Crotone (Salon of 1789, Paris, Louvre) (fig.3), which instructed viewers about the Greek painter’s need to combine the most beautiful features of five different models when his search to find the ideal model for a portrait of Helen of Troy failed. Depicting fifth century sculpture, Greek Doric architecture, and line drawing as the foundation for the portrait Zeuxis would paint, Vincent displayed the cultural world’s growing interest in classical archeology, art and literature. Whether known to Vanderlyn or not, Vincent had also revealed some complicity with the French Revolution by painting the Jacobin hero, William Tell, in Guillaume Tell renversant la barque sur laquelle le gouverneur Gessler traversait le lac de Lucerne (commissioned in


20. Ibid., 87-88.

21. John Vanderlyn to Peter Vanderlyn, October 23, 1797, Herbert Darrow Collection, Senate House Museum, transcribed in Oedel, “John Vanderlyn,” 69 and 113n17.

1791; Salon of 1795, no. 528, Musée des Augustins, Toulouse) (fig.4). Vincent proved to be a respected teacher for Vanderlyn.

During this first stay in France, Vanderlyn met Joel Barlow and sketched him in 1798 (fig.5) at the Neuilly estate of Fulwar Skipwith (1765–1839), a diplomat from the United States. Vanderlyn’s formative years in Europe ended in 1801 when he took advantage of a peace agreement between the United States and the French Republic to return to America, aided by Burr’s generosity once again.

While Vanderlyn was living in New York (1801–1803), Burr’s political circle engaged him for numerous portrait commissions, among them for paintings of Roger Strong, Mr. and Mrs. John Livingston, Mrs. Marinus Willett and her son Marinus, Jr., Theodosia Burr, and Aaron Burr. He began, but did not finish, portraits of Doctor Samuel Bard and George Clinton, Jr. (both now lost). Yet Vanderlyn also sought ways to create funding beyond portraiture, and he conceived a plan to sell engravings of views he would paint of Niagara Falls (fig. 6). To begin his entrepreneurial venture, Vanderlyn traveled to Niagara to sketch the falls in September 1801. The project would consume him periodically throughout the rest of his life.

23. Ibid., 80-81.
26. Zygmont, “Portraiture and Politics in New York City,” 104-109. Zygmont’s research notes the family connections of Vanderlyn’s sitters (cousins and early childhood friends) and the political connections of Vanderlyn’s sitters, primarily to Aaron Burr.
After Vanderlyn’s return from Niagara, Edward Livingston (1764–1836), president of the American Academy of Fine Arts, commissioned him to collect reproductions of ancient sculpture and copies of Old Master paintings in order to form the basis of a teaching collection in New York City. This commission would enable Vanderlyn to return to France and to travel to Italy as well, and he arrived in Paris in May 1803.

Vanderlyn celebrated July 4th and the Louisiana Purchase in the company of its negotiators, U.S. Minister to France Robert Livingston (1746–1813) and James Monroe (1758–1831), who would soon be installed as the U.S. Minister to England. Vanderlyn traveled to London with Monroe, sought an engraver for his Niagara views, painted Mrs. Monroe’s portrait to pay for his passage back to Paris, and visited the studio of colonial American expatriate Benjamin West (1738–1820), president of the British Royal Academy. He met American painter Washington Allston (1779–1843), who was studying with West at the Royal Academy, and they traveled together to Paris via Rotterdam and Antwerp in October. Vanderlyn’s preoccupation was with the Niagara views and with fulfilling the Academy commission; no record pinpoints the time when he was approached with the commission to illustrate The Columbiad.


30. Robert Fulton is regarded as the broker for the commission for Vanderlyn. Nonetheless, Vanderlyn’s arrival in London with James Monroe may have been early enough to overlap with Joel Barlow’s stay, where he is said to have heard about the
Joel Barlow and The Columbiad

Europe’s political transformation in the last decade of the eighteenth century influenced Joel Barlow’s views significantly and provided him with extraordinary content for his literary interests when he lived in France, England, and Germany from 1788 to 1804. In his years at Yale College, Barlow developed political writing as an avocation and was affiliated with the Federalist-leaning Connecticut Wits. As a member of that group, Barlow admired monarchy and federalist principles: “a strong federal government, a desire for order and stability at the expense of individual action, and…nationalistic pride.” In 1788, the Scioto Company, which was the European branch of the U.S.-based land investment firm the Ohio Company, employed Barlow to travel to France to sell land in the Ohio River valley. By 1790, the first of the Scioto Company’s French investors had arrived in America only to discover their land deeds were worthless. Scandal and bankruptcy forced Barlow to leave France for London, but by this time, he had witnessed the growing discord between French citizens and the aristocracy and monarchy during the burgeoning French Revolution.


and his political shift against “the privileged orders” was well underway. During this time, contact with Thomas Paine and other revolutionary thinkers inspired him to write the pamphlet *Advice to the Privileged Orders in the Several States of Europe, resulting from the Necessity and Propriety of a General Revolution in the Principles of Government* (1792). *Advice to the Privileged Orders* argued against a feudal system of power and privilege, against a national church because of its incompatibility with personal liberty, and for the social morality, or duty, of government to all people, not just the “privileged orders.”

Barlow returned to France in 1792, just before the execution of Louis XVI and the commencement of the Reign of Terror in 1793. With the political climate as motivation, he traveled throughout France and wrote prodigiously, presenting a “Letter” to the National Convention of France in late 1792 on equality and self-government, which won him distinction as an honorary Citizen of France. The expectation that he would be sent to the National Convention as the deputy of Savoy did not come to fruition, so Barlow launched a business exporting goods for the benefit of French citizens for which he traveled frequently to Germany and the Netherlands, amassing a fortune.

In 1797, France, under the Directorate, ordered the capture of American ships bound to or from British ports, which sparked a wave of anti-French sentiment in John Adams’s administration and a Federalist-supported alliance with Britain. Barlow, however, unlike many American expatriates in


Europe, argued openly in favor of French republican principles, Deism, and the importance of good relations with France.\textsuperscript{36} Noah Webster, a colleague of Barlow in Connecticut, declared his writings “contemptuous.”\textsuperscript{37} Along with the political climate in Europe, Barlow’s political views had been completely transformed.

Aspects of Barlow’s political views appear to resonate with Vanderlyn’s political associations. Vanderlyn was somewhat circumspect about his politics while he attempted to make a living from his painting, yet he was obviously acquainted with pro-French Americans both in Paris and in New York, due in large part to his patron, Aaron Burr.\textsuperscript{38} On occasion he indicated his views more openly, as in a letter to his brother Peter Vanderlyn from Paris on March 10, 1798:

\begin{quote}
I hear nothing extraordinary nowadays. Preparations for the Descent on England are going on bravely, Bounaparte is returned from visiting the preparations in the different Ports & Haughty Britania already trembels I dont doubt. Our minister has had no audience yet & how matters will be settled is not known neither, & we must thank those pretended Patriots of ours for all this, however I trust you have changed your principals at present with a great many others I immagine whose eyes have been so long purblind for all I dont know how affairs are in America, but could wish them to appear better in the eyes of this Government whose menace they deserve.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{36} Ford, \textit{Joel Barlow}, 31.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{38} Zygmont, “Portraiture and Politics in New York City,” 91. Zygmont argues that Federalists avoided Vanderlyn based on his association with Burr, even prior to Burr’s scandalous duel with Alexander Hamilton in July 1804, and that Vanderlyn’s French neoclassic style was linked to pro-French political views.
\end{flushright}
Throughout the last decade of the eighteenth century and into the first decade of
the nineteenth century, Barlow revised *The Vision of Columbus*, an epic poem he had first
published in 1787, to promote republican idealism more pointedly and “to exhibit the
importance of this country [America] in every point of view, as the noblest and most
elevated part of the earth.”

He added Book Six to strengthen an appeal for a stronger alliance between the United States and France. Book Six includes stories of American Revolutionary battles with characters and heroes who rose up against the heinous tactics Britain could employ when at war. Barlow must have known that the murder of Jane McCrea would still hold compelling political power more than twenty years after the actual event, and wrote an extended narrative about Jane McCrea (renamed Lucinda) and her betrothed, David Jones (renamed Heartly), and their tragic story of loyalty and love. Book Six ends with the capture of British General John Burgoyne.

Barlow called *The Columbiad* his "Invocation to Freedom."

Barlow endeavored "to encourage and strengthen in the rising generation a sense of
the importance of republican institutions as the foundation of public and individual well-
being, the necessary source of future and permanent improvements in the human
condition." Nationalism in the era of the Enlightenment stressed the betterment of society

40. Joel Barlow, as quoted in Todd, *The Life and Letters of Joel Barlow*, 15-17. A version of *The Vision of Columbus* (1787) was published in Paris in 1793.


43. Ford, *Joel Barlow*, 80. Ford also states (78-79) that Barlow’s “conscious dignifying of his lines” is comparable to Milton’s “development of a common interest out of many individual interests” in *Paradise Lost* (1667).
at the expense of the individual, yet after witnessing the struggle of French citizens to achieve self-government, Barlow adjusted his nationalistic viewpoint through repeated calls for the importance of individual liberty.\textsuperscript{44}

Barlow’s overall goal was “to redeem America from European condescension” and to create “American literary independence…by drawing on indigenous themes and subjects.”\textsuperscript{45} However, his mission was based on American authorship and American subject matter not on a rejection of European stylistic influences, given that \textit{The Columbiad} was written in a historically European-derived dactylic hexameter, the standard literary rhythm for the epic poems he studied at Yale, specifically \textit{The Iliad of Homer} translated by Alexander Pope (1715–1720) and Virgil’s \textit{Aeneid} (29 to 19 BCE).\textsuperscript{46} \textit{The Columbiad} also features a main character ostensibly from mythology, Hesper, the evening star and “guardian Genius of the Western World,” who appears to an imprisoned Christopher Columbus to reveal the fate of the land called America, from his discovery to

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 64. Ford references Leon Howard, "The Late Eighteenth Century: An Age of Contradictions," in \textit{Transitions in American Literary History}, ed. Harry Hayden Clark (Durham, 1954), 71. Ford claims that Barlow owned a copy of Voltaire's \textit{Essay on Epic Poetry} (1727), which could possibly have been the influence for his own definition of the epic with “less adherence to strict Neoclassical rules and the substitution of contemporary figures in place of Classical ones.”


the intercession of France in the Revolution. Of both the format of his epic and its relation to classicism, Barlow wrote:

I shall enter into no discussion on the nature of the epopee (sic), nor attempt to prove by any latitude of reasoning that I have written an Epic Poem. The subject indeed is vast; far superior to any one of those on which the celebrated poems of this description have been constructed; and I have no doubt but the form I have given to the work is the best that the subject would admit.

But these circumstances of classical regularity are of little consideration in estimating the real merit of any work of this nature. Its merit must depend on the importance of the action, the disposition of the parts, the invention and application of incidents, the propriety of the illustrations, the liveliness and chastity of the images, the suitable intervention of machinery, the moral tendency of the manners, the strength and sublimity of the sentiments; the whole being clothed in language whose energy, harmony and elegance shall constitute a style everywhere suited to the matter they have to treat (emphasis mine).

Reliance on the classics indicated that Barlow’s American education was comparable to the European curriculum and that he aspired to create an American literature that could be placed alongside the classics. Both Barlow and Vanderlyn knew that to achieve their ambitious goals, European acceptance was critical.

[The project of distinguishing American literary culture from its British legacy could succeed only if it were acknowledged by both American and European readers alike, and so Barlow and his coterie were obliged to engage in a conversation with a European audience and to draw upon a European literary tradition while simultaneously rallying their countrymen to forge an American poetics. Such a dual purpose is at the heart of Barlow’s *The Vision of Columbus* (1787), his attempt to write the great American epic, an achievement that was to be recognized on both sides of the Atlantic.]


In their creative endeavors, Vanderlyn and Barlow worked within the accepted norms of late-eighteenth-century neoclassicism to establish American credibility abroad and therefore at home. Barlow’s achievements could be considered a literary parallel to the efforts of American artists Benjamin West, John Singleton Copley (1738–1815), and John Trumbull (1756–1843), whose paintings of revolutionary war heroes during the late decades of the eighteenth-century followed West’s classicistic Grand Manner and yet served to call attention to the potentiality of American cultural significance. Unlike Barlow, who received no further formal education in Europe, American artists completed their training abroad. Vanderlyn appeared to speak for himself as well as other artists from America who sought training based on the accepted European masters, when he wrote that the American Academy’s intent to create a teaching collection offered him “the many superior advantages of improving myself in my art, in pursuing a regular course of studies, without which it is impossible to arrive at any degree of eminence.”

Classicism in Vanderlyn’s *The Murder of Jane McCrea*

*The Murder of Jane McCrea* is based on an American narrative with references to antique figures admired by the French Academy and on view in the Louvre. For example, the


possible source for the pose of both Native Americans is a Hellenistic sculpture, *Fighting Warrior* (known as the *Borghese Gladiator*), circa 100 BCE, signed by Agasias of Ephesus, son of Dositheos (fig. 7).\(^{52}\) Another Greek sculpture, the *Wounded Niobid*, ca. 440 B.C (fig.8), who witnesses the slaying of her children because she boasts of their beauty, could be the source for the pose of Jane McCrea.\(^{53}\) The *Apollo Belvedere*, 2nd century A.D. (fig. 9), a Roman copy of Greek bronze statue by Leochares 350 - 325 B.C., is assumed to be the source for the figure of David Jones.\(^{54}\) The painting’s compressed foreground tableau is reminiscent of antique sarcophagi, and the dramatic expressions may have been inspired by the *Laocoön* (fig. 10), from the early 1st century B.C., or by Vanderlyn’s own studies of *LeBrun’s* expression exercises in 1791 and 1792.\(^{55}\) Vanderlyn’s figures are firmly contoured with articulated muscularity, the composition features the narrative action in a frontal plane, and the color harmonies appear to be derived from his teacher Vincent or the


\(^{53}\) Kathleen H. Pritchard, "John Vanderlyn and the Massacre of Jane McCrea" *Art Quarterly* 12 (Autumn 1949): 366; Benjamin Rowland, Jr., *The Classical Tradition in Western Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963): 317; Craven, "The Grand Manner,” 15; and Oedel, “John Vanderlyn,” 232. A Kneeling Venus sculpture that had arrived in Paris in 1803 is often suggested as a source; however, this figure’s deeply bending pose and torso that twists gently as if to bath her own back does not convey the same center of gravity as the figure of Jane McCrea.

\(^{54}\) Oedel, “John Vanderlyn,” 234.

\(^{55}\) Craven, "The Grand Manner,” 15; Lindsay, *The Works of John Vanderlyn*, 8 and fig. 3; and Oedel, “John Vanderlyn,” 232. Oedel compares the visual fluidity of the *Laocoôn* to the movement of the Jane McCrea painting.
early and honored paintings of the French Revolution, such as Jacques-Louis David’s *Oath of the Horatii* (1784, Musée du Louvre, Paris) (fig.11).\textsuperscript{56} Vanderlyn’s composition, like the *Oath of the Horatii*, uses a small number of actors to bring focused intensity to the main storyline. The musculature of Vanderlyn’s male figures and the heaviness of his female figure are not referential to the newer, leaner or *plus grec* style as practiced by David in his *Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799, Musée du Louvre, Paris) (fig. 12).\textsuperscript{57} Vanderlyn’s painting is much closer in spirit and style to early Davidian revolutionary paintings than to the war histories of his American colleagues, e.g., Benjamin West’s *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770 (fig. 13).\textsuperscript{58} Yet Vanderlyn’s technical skill and, in the tradition of the Grand Manner, his ability to elevate the viewer’s intellect with a moral subject and layered meaning won him entrance to the Salon.\textsuperscript{59}

*The Murder of Jane McCrea* was exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1804 with this description: “un jeune femme massacrée par deux sauvages en service des Anglais dans guerre d’Amerique. Evénement historique consigné dans le sixième livre de la

\textsuperscript{56} Oedel, “John Vanderlyn,” 237. Oedel comments on Vanderlyn’s neoclassic palette: “Vanderlyn was, and remained, closer to Vincent, whose work, as we have noted, provided ample instruction in a frieze-like arrangement of figures, in statuesque poses and clean outlines, in the juxtaposition of austere, metallic reds and blues, in voyeuristic eroticism, and in the integration of figures within a landscape setting.”


\textsuperscript{58} Oedel, “John Vanderlyn,” 225. Vanderlyn visited West’s atelier in the summer of 1803, prior to his return to Paris where he painted "The Murder of Jane McCrea" between November 1803 and the date it was hung at Salon, September 18, 1804. If he saw West’s “The Death of General Wolfe,” Vanderlyn may have noticed the effective inclusion of a Native American, the contemporary dress of the military officers (including two in blue coats), and the use of a frontal stage for the main action of the painting.

\textsuperscript{59} Abrams, *The Valiant Hero*, 9 and 202.
Columbiade, poème américain." The description can be translated as “a young woman murdered by two savages hired by the British in the American war. The historic event is described in the sixth book of *The Columbiad*, an American poem.” Vanderlyn could not assume that viewers would know Barlow’s Lucinda narrative, since *The Columbiad* would not be published in the United States for three more years (and was not published in France, in English, until 1813). The story of Jane McCrea was known in Europe, however, and can be traced to at least two published works from 1784, one fiction (Michel René Hilliard-d'Auberteuil, *Mis Mac Rae, roman historique*) and the other an engraving (*Sarratoga, dessiné par Fauvel*) (fig. 14), as well as a British print from 1778, which will receive further discussion in this paper.61

That the painting’s title explicitly draws attention to the factual and tragic murder of the young American during war, rather than the story of the character in *The Columbiad*, reinforces the probability that Vanderlyn used this opportunity to demonstrate his abilities and to paint a work that aspired to terms more heroic than mere illustration, based on the Academy’s hierarchy of genres which prioritized “multi-figured

60. *Explication des ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, architecture et gravure, des artistes vivans, exposés au musée Napoleon de 1er jour complémentaire, an XII de la république française* (Paris: 1804. Reprinted New York: Garland, 1977), no. 495. For this entry, Vanderlyn was identified as: “VAN DER LYN, élève de M. Vincent, hôtel Marigny, place du Louvre.” Vanderlyn’s self-portrait had been exhibited at the Salon in 1804.

compositions relating complex narratives from historical, mythological or biblical sources.”

The prevailing academic protocols influenced Vanderlyn’s formal concerns (composition, figuration, and expressions of his characters) and his choice of an American subject. Similarly, Barlow borrowed the rational tones and structures of literary classicism, maintained a contemporary political stance, and chronicled history based around a main (although fictionalized) American character and subject. In The Murder of Jane McCrea, Vanderlyn displayed, claims one art historian, “the inclination of his era to formulate history around the actions of individuals, as well as Barlow’s own desire, born of the Revolution, to posit a non-English patrimony for North America.” In iconographic details, however, Vanderlyn’s departure from both the historical story of Jane McCrea and Barlow’s account in The Columbiad as well as other fictionalizations may have appealed to French nationalism more than Barlow’s American republic agenda.

Vanderlyn’s Commission

The original commission to illustrate The Columbiad was given to painter and inventor Robert Fulton (1765–1815), a close friend of Barlow’s. Letters from Barlow to Fulton,

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whom he affectionately called “Toot,” indicate how enthusiastic Barlow was about
completing the project with his friend.

1 Prairial, 1802 Toot:—Mme. Villette desires you would send Charlotte's portrait by
the diligence if you can. I don't send you any subject for a drawing for the poem this

time, nor perhaps any more until you write me how you like the project, and whether
you can do them properly. I wish this work could be done in the family as much as
possible.

...9th Prairial. Dear Toot:—How happy I am that you succeed so well with the
drawings, and that you have it so much at heart to make a splendid edition of the
work.

26th. Toot, the drawings appear to me very perfect. I shall not have time to show
them to Denon till my return.64

But after Fulton’s sketches received some criticism from Benjamin West, who was
visiting Paris in 1802, and Baron Dominique Vivant Denon (1747–1825), director
general of the Imperial Museums (including the Louvre), Fulton abandoned the
commission to devote time to his steamboat design.65 He continued with his friend’s
project by acting as an intermediary for the illustrations, and invited Vanderlyn, who had

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64. Barlow to Robert Fulton, Paris, 1 Prairial, 1802 (20 May 1802), in Todd, The
Life and Letters of Joel Barlow, 187-191. Barlow continued his appreciation for Fulton’s
work on the project: “You designed the subjects to be painted for the engravings; and,
able to convince me that the work could merit such expensive (sic) & splendid
decorations, you ordered them to be executed, in my absence, under your immediate
direction, and at your own expence (sic). So that the whole work, as put into the hands of
the publisher, and estimated according to its cost, is much the greater part of yours
already.” Barlow to Fulton, The Columbiad, 1807, dedication page reprinted as a letter in
Ezra Kempton Maxfield, “The Tom Barlow Manuscript of the Columbiad,” The New
England Quarterly 11, no. 4 (December 1938):834-842, stable URL:

65. "I have been to Denon and then to Gamble with the drawings...He [Denon]
praised the composition a good deal, but found some defects in the drawing." Joel Barlow to
Robert Fulton, 5th Thermidor, in Todd, Life and Letters of Joel Barlow, 198; Carrie Rebora,
Fulton’s sketch for the murder of Lucinda is lost.
sketched Barlow in 1798, to take the commission in 1803. Letters from Barlow to Fulton in 1802–1803 recommend images and compositions for the illustrations, yet it is impossible to know whether Vanderlyn followed Fulton’s concepts or read the entire poem. After all, Vanderlyn and Barlow could have discussed the commission when both were in residence in Paris in 1803.

The Murder of Jane McCrea is the only painting Vanderlyn completed for The Columbiad commission. He mistakenly assumed Barlow would pay more than initially negotiated as an acknowledgment of the painting’s acceptance into the exhibition at the Louvre Salon in 1804. When he wrote to request an additional payment for it, instead he learned that Barlow had turned the commission for The Columbiad series over to English artist Robert Smirke (1752–1845), a specialist in literary illustration. The failed

66. Wiesinger, Les Américains et la Révolution française, cat.no. 85, p. 74 and pp.102-103. Cat. no. 85 is John Vanderlyn, Joel Barlow, 1796 (charcoal and pencil drawing on paper. 20/15.2 at Washington: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joel Barlow. Ref. NPG.76.31). Vanderlyn’s travels from Paris to London and his return via Amsterdam, would have kept him away from painting until early 1804.

67. “…I…intend to exhibit them [the Niagara paintings] on the 4th of July at Mr. Livingstons where there is to be a great patriotic feast.” Vanderlyn to Nicholas Vanderlyn, Paris, July 1, 1803, in Oedel, “John Vanderlyn,” 196. The Barlows lived at No.50 Rue de Vaugirard from 1802–4 except for a short trip to England during the summer of 1803, in Todd, Life and Letters of Joel Barlow, 203.

68. Vanderlyn to Barlow, November 24, 1804 in Pritchard, "John Vanderlyn and the Massacre of Jane McCrea," 361; Edgerton, "The Murder of Jane McCrea," 482; and Oedel, “John Vanderlyn,” 221, 224 and 254, note 82. The merit of the work was reported by J. Pinkerton in 1806, but no American criticism was recorded until 1813.

commission has been detailed in several published sources\textsuperscript{70} and is most frequently cited as an early example of Vanderlyn’s poor business acumen.

Vanderlyn’s inability to produce more than one of the ten illustrations and his request for an increase in the promised price is an adequate explanation for his dismissal, particularly because no evidence exists that Barlow may have been dissatisfied with the painting artistically. The painting was removed “after having been some time at the exhibition,” as Vanderlyn claimed in his letter to Barlow on November 24, 1804, or for approximately one month based on evidence from exhibition records and letters; Vanderlyn shipped it to New York in October 1804.\textsuperscript{71} It is not inconceivable, however, that Barlow visited the Louvre or discussed the work with others before he traveled to London that fall. Barlow left London for New York on November 2, 1804.\textsuperscript{72}


\textsuperscript{71}. Vanderlyn to Barlow, November 24, 1804, in Pritchard, "John Vanderlyn and the Massacre of Jane McCrea," 361; and Vanderlyn to Robert J. Livingston, October 25, 1804 in Oedel, “John Vanderlyn,” 222 and note 85. Shelton, \textit{Ingres}, 229 states that the 1804 Salon opened on 22 September.

\textsuperscript{72}. Todd, \textit{Life and Letters of Joel Barlow}, 203. That portraits of both Barlow and Fulton by French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828) were exhibited in the Salon of 1804 along with Vanderlyn’s painting certainly suggests that Barlow had multiple reasons to visit the exhibition. The portrait of Barlow exists as a marble bust and a plaster bust: \textit{Joel Barlow}, 1803 (marble bust), Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 58.4cm high, signed under right shoulder "houdon an XII," under left shoulder, "J. Barlow 50 ans." and \textit{Joel Barlow}, 1804 (plaster bust) Versailles, Lambinet Museum, 1041 (MV 5735); see William Howard Adams, ed., \textit{The Eye of Thomas Jefferson: Exhibition} (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1976), cat. no. 346, p. 200 (marble bust) and Wiesinger, \textit{Les Américains et la Révolution française}, cat. no. 86, p.74 and p.103 (plaster bust) and n. 639 (bronze bust of Fulton).
The differences between the Smirke illustration, entitled “The Murder of Lucinda” (1807) (fig. 15), and the Vanderlyn painting are remarkable. Compositionally, the two works are similar: under a tree, the female figure is flanked by Native Americans wielding hatchets, and a male figure is positioned too far away to rescue the female from her fate. Smirke’s illustration creates depth from a slightly elevated viewpoint and volume from the rounded forms and circular, lighted center stage of action. The soldier figure is small, though not as tiny as the one painted by Vanderlyn, and is on the same side of the forest as the main figure group, leaving distance with a much clearer path to cross for the rescue. The tree above and behind Lucinda and the Native Americans in Smirke’s illustration is rooted beyond the illustration’s frame and triangulates the upper right hand section of the composition. Vanderlyn’s main figure group is positioned as if on a flat theatrical stage; the Native American on the viewer’s right moves into the scene and tightens his grip on Jane’s long hair. The void between him and Jane is awkward but helps to direct our eyes to Jane. The tree behind them is firm and vertical. Beyond the elbow of the Native American on the right and what appears to be a darkened land mass, a clearing reveals the tiny figure attempting the impossible rescue under a blue sky in the upper right corner. Vanderlyn’s composition is not unlike that of a contemporaneous portrait that lends the sitter prestige and reveals a bit of the sitter’s history in the landscape beyond.

In the Smirke illustration, pathos emerges from Lucinda’s soft form and face with her small mouth and eyes lifted toward the knife aimed at her throat. Although one of the

73. Smirke’s paintings are lost. The engraving by Anker Smith, after Robert Smirke, of “The Murder of Lucinda” is reprinted in Rebora, “Robert Fulton's Art Collection,” fig. 8, p. 50.
Native Americans clutches the end of her long hair, there is no tension on her scalp; these are murderous assailants with an easy prey. She wilts fluidly against the force of her attackers, falling to her knees. The neckline of the gown worn by Smirke’s Lucinda gently opens toward, but does not reveal, her left breast. The Native Americans envelope her, creating a spatial volume in comparison to Vanderlyn’s stiff and two-dimensional lateral action. Vanderlyn’s Jane is dressed in a crisp blue and white gown with a Directoire-inspired light pink sash and décolletage that exposes her right breast. Portrayed in a sharply defined side view, her eyes seek direct pity from her murderer. She has weight and muscle, and she kneels as if in struggle with her captors.

Barlow’s requirements for artistic merit, and especially his belief in “the propriety of the illustrations,” as annunciated in his Preface to the 1809 edition of The Columbiad, and quoted above on page 18, suggest another possible reason why Vanderlyn’s painting might not have impressed him sufficiently to sustain the commission. His concern for propriety, chastity, morality, and style in concert with the written text could have caused him to be displeased with Vanderlyn’s style or iconography and so prompted Vanderlyn’s loss of the commission. Vanderlyn may have painted the elements of Jane’s story to serve the general assignment but missed the more subtle cues from The Columbiad in his execution.

Barlow’s intention to merge political meaning with literary conceit is stated clearly in the Preface to The Columbiad:

But there is one point of view in which I wish the reader to place the character of my work, before he pronounces on its merit: I mean its political tendency. There are two distinct objects to be kept in view in the conduct of a narrative poem; the political object and the moral object. The poetical is the fictitious design of the action; the moral is the real design of the poem.\footnote{74 Barlow, The Columbiad, Preface. In his preface, Barlow also discusses the poetical and moral objectives of The Iliad of Homer and Virgil’s Aeneid.}
Could Barlow’s concepts of “political tendency” and “moral object” be valid guides to Vanderlyn’s iconography? Did Vanderlyn consider political and moral issues in his composition? The murder of Jane McCrea held political, moral, and emotional meaning in America and in France during the American Revolution and in the years following it. Vanderlyn successfully addressed political and moral issues in *The Murder of Jane McCrea*, but the overtones of the French Revolution may have missed the level of propriety required by his patron, Joel Barlow.

The “political,” the “poetical,” and the “moral object”

The murder of Jane McCrea was committed on Sunday, July 27, 1777. The course of events on that summer day is speculative; no witness, if there was any, left a record of his or her experience. But, as early as August 3, 1777, the Hartford *Connecticut Courant* reported:

> We have received an account of an extraordinary instance of cruelty at Fort Edwards...a band of Indians traveling with 400 British Regulars...draged [sic] an old woman and girl out of the house, killed and scalped the old woman, fired two braces of balls through the body of the girl, and then...


scalped her. The girl was a sweet heart to an officer in the enemy's service, and a great tory—Hear, O Heavens! and give ear, Oh America!” 77

The facts were soon layered with moral judgments and became “poetical,” or perhaps fictitious, with astonishing speed. The Boston Independent Chronicle for August 14, 1777, reported the incident with emotionally-charged imagery and an increased amount of political commentary:

Even the harmless, helpless female, by nature, too feeble to make a defence (sic), falls a sacrifice to their [British] thirst for blood. It is undoubtably true that they took a young woman out of a house at Fort Edward, dragged the harmless victim into the woods, and in cool blood, murdered and scalped her. This has been the unhappy lot of several other women.... The rage of our enemy will never be softened even by the most humiliating submission. The prayers of a defenceless (sic) prisoner will not prevail; even an innocent female on her knee, praying for mercy, could not awake one pitying sensation, nor did her tears, fast flowing, cool their fiery souls; but unmoved at a sight, that would make e'en rocks weep, they mangled, like beasts of prey, the defenceless (sic) being. Though this, perhaps, was not done immediately by the hands of Britons, yet it was done by British hirelings. No reason can possibly be given for their cruelty, but this, the captive was an American. 78

The Boston Independent Chronicle also questioned Britain’s ability to rule the colonies wisely, and described Britain as a nation guided by evil:

[I]t seems as if they [Britain] intended to force us to submission, by wounding our humanity. Unless this be their design, they must be disposed to murder, merely for the sake of murdering—a disposition so infernal, that it is, just to fear, that like Devils, whose element is cruelty, they never will cease tormenting. From their behavior of late, it is manifest, that in the same proportion fortune smiles on their arms, they become more barbarous. And


78. Boston Independent Chronicle, August 14, 1777, 1.
can we doubt, my countrymen! but should the Americans be such poltroons, as to permit the enemy to conquer this continent? 

As conveyed in such accounts, the incident heightened the fear that civilian murders were to be endured throughout the revolution and beyond, if Britain was to win the war and establish a permanent colonial state. Burgoyne captured Fort Edward three days after McCrea’s murder, on July 30, 1777. For the next two months, patriots and those once marginally committed to the Loyalists enlisted to fight for the cause of colonial freedom, and the surge of manpower ultimately contributed to the defeat of British General Burgoyne during the Battles of Saratoga (September 19 through October 7, 1777).

The victory of Saratoga brought France to the aid of the colonies in the fight for independence. French soldiers were dispatched to the North American continent as early as 1778. The French public was quite aware of events in the American Revolution, as evidenced by a brief quote by François Jean De Beauvoir, Marquis De Chastellux (1734–1796).

79. Ibid., 1.


81. Fliegelman, Prodigals and Pilgrims, 139. Quoting Fairfax Downey, Indian Wars of the U.S. Army 1776–1865 (Monarch Books, 1962), Fliegelman emphasizes the role of McCrea’s murder in recruiting patriots. In opposition, John S. Pancake, 1777: The Year of the Hangman (University: University of Alabama Press, 1977), 153–4, quantifies the troops who joined the patriot cause over a period of months to fight for victory at Saratoga, concluding that the majority of the force had formed prior to the death of McCrea. His research shows that 70 percent of the Northern army had gathered seven days prior to the murder of Jane McCrea. Downey’s view, however, predominates.

82. "Saratoga...changed the rebellion into a Revolution in the eyes of other nations... It gave America prestige and credit abroad on which badly needed loans of money were secured. And finally it brought into the struggle on the American side, first France and then other nations and thus practically insured victory for the American cause." New York (State) State Historian, The American Revolution In New York, 167.
1788), a visitor to the United States. He wrote about Fort Edward on December 30, 1780, which, by then, had been returned to United States control: "Such is Fort Edward, so much spoken of in Europe…" 83

In Britain, six months after the murder of Jane McCrea, the incident was satirized in a London publication entitled "The Closet. No. I" (January 28, 1778) (fig. 16a and 16b, detail) as one of the atrocities of the Revolution. 84 In the first of six vignettes set in America and England, four Native Americans are depicted attacking three colonists with tomahawks and knives outside the burning city of Esopus (also called Kingston). 85 Jane McCrea (identified as "McRae") kneels slightly left of center with her hands clasped together crying "O horrid! is this the Marriage Ceremony?" in what appears to be ridicule of the American concept of a sacred ritual. Her kneeling pose could have originated from news


84. Cresswell, The American Revolution in Drawings and Prints, 302-303, fig. 725, which is The Closet. No.1, Bute Invt. xt. Mansfield Sculpt. [Publish'd as the Act directs Jany. 28th 1778, by I Williams No. 39 Fleet Street. Aquatint with etching 8 3/4 x 14 in. ‘Germaine Ext.’] In addition to the scene of the burning of Esopus, which includes a kneeling Jane McCrea, there are five scenes that depict George III with the Devil, Lord Bute, Lord Mansfield, and Lord Germain discussing the problems of the war; Charles Yorke, Lord Chancellor, commits suicide; seven Native Americans roast an American patriot on a spit; Burgoyne and his captive army march past Gates and the victorious Americans; and German and Scottish mercenaries flee from American troops. The scenes are linked by the device of ships taking British troops to Quebec and Boston, and wounded people back to Britain.

85. The Dutch settlement of Esopus was renamed Kingston in 1664 but was occasionally referred to as Esopus for decades. Kingston burned in the campaign in October 1777; therefore the drawing in The Closet collapses time and events.
reports (“…even an innocent female on her knee, praying for mercy”). How did the British press latch onto the notion that McCrea was to be married?

The first assertion that I have found linking Jane’s murder to her impending marriage appears in the letter to General Burgoyne from General Gates, the American commander, dated September 2, 1777:

Miss McCrea, a young lady lovely to the sight, of virtuous character and amiable disposition, engaged to be married to an officer in your Army, was with other women and children taken out of a house near Fort-Edward, carried into the woods, and there scalped and mangled in a most shocking manner.... The miserable fate of Miss McCrea was particularly aggravated by her being dressed to receive her promised husband, but met her murderer employed by you.87

The assumptions in this short passage are carried into the legend of Jane McCrea and provide the foundation for dual interpretations of the story in America in 1777 and in Europe in 1804, potentially influencing the reception of Vanderlyn’s painting. The perception of Native Americans and their alleged role in Jane McCrea’s torturous murder, her engagement, and her intention to marry her fiancé on the day of her death all became intertwined with the legend and with Barlow’s concept of the “political,” “poetical,” and “moral object.”

American rage regarding the murder tended to be centered on the broadly political issue of Britain’s use of mercenaries, and specifically that Britain’s military leadership paid Native Americans to terrorize citizens and so failed to protect the colonists’ safety and

86. Boston Independent Chronicle, August 14, 1777, 1.

human rights. General Horatio Gates expressed his outrage in this correspondence with British General Burgoyne:

That the savages of America should in their warfare mangle and scalp the unhappy prisoners who fall into their hands, is neither new nor extraordinary; but that the famous Lieutenant General Burgoyne, in whom the fine Gentleman is united with the Soldier and the Scholar, should hire the savages of America to scalp Europeans and the descendants of Europeans, nay more, that he should pay a price for each scalp so barbarously taken, is more than will be believed in Europe, until authenticated facts shall, in every Gazette, convince mankind of the truth of the horrid fate.

Although clearly irritated by the accusation, Burgoyne eloquently explained his openly disclosed policy to conduct “transactions with the Indian Nations…for prisoners” in order to prevent cruelty, withholding compensation if prisoners were harmed. In his response to Gates, Burgoyne claimed that he dispatched two Native Americans to escort McCrea safely to the British camp. They argued about which of them should be her guard, and "...in a fit of savage passion in the one from whose hands she was snatched, the unhappy woman became the victim." He attempted to distance the British from responsibility for the murder by calling attention to the widely held European and

88. Walter Hart Blumenthal, *Women Camp Followers of the American Revolution* (New York: Arno Press, 1974 [©1952]), 23-24. Burgoyne had a history of giving liquor to Native Americans "'without any Rule or Ration', a supply of 125,000 gallons having been shipped from the West Indies for them in 1776," and in early July 1777, had ruled the practice of selling or giving alcohol to them by women or men in the British camps to be an offense punishable by a Court Martial.


American notion that Native Americans were savages not yet able to control their passions and violent outbursts. The political accusations and mistrust of “savages” have entered into the general interpretation of *The Murder of Jane McCrea*. That is, Edgerton and Oedel argue persuasively that Vanderlyn painted McCrea’s pale white skin in contrast to the dark skin of the Natives and therefore “… equated the American struggle for freedom from corrupt British absolutism with the classic conflict between light and darkness, order and chaos, good and evil.”

Barlow seems to search beyond the classic conflict with Britain and the light/dark metaphor of an innocent white American female harmed by dark-skinned passionate savages to question the morality of the Native Americans:

> Two Mohawks met the maid,—historian, hold!—
> Poor human nature, must thy shame be told?
> Where then that proud preeminence of birth,
> Thy moral sense? the brightest boast of earth.
> Had but the tiger changed his heart for thine,
> Could rocks their bowels with that heart combine,
> Thy tear had gusht, thy hand relieved her pain
> And led Lucinda to her lord again.  

He speaks of the human failure to meet high moral standards, and the disappointment that the Mohawks—regardless of the British bribe—did not hold to a moral code in their primitive and natural state, and instead placed their personal passion (to claim the woman) above reason and civility." The differences between the Vanderlyn and Smirke Mohawks are minor; both depict the “savage” nature of all humans, that is, passionate and irrational


people who are capable of immoral actions, and who are, in this case, unable to “suspend the
knife” with a “superior (moral) bribe.” The dark and light contrast in skin color in the
Vanderlyn painting is a technique to help us focus on Jane as much as it is a mark of the
exotic. The Mohawks in the Vanderlyn composition are not contemplating their moral
compass but are instead intently focused on the action of scalping. To further emphasize
their blind savagery, Vanderlyn adds a teardrop to Jane’s fearful and pleading expression.
In the depiction of the Mohawks and their lack of civility, Vanderlyn excelled.

The inherent morality of the Native Americans is also an aspect of the method of
killing. The first account of Jane McCrea’s actual death in the August 3, 1777, Hartford
Connecticut Courant claims Native Americans "fired two braces of balls through the body
of the girl, and then scalped her." An allegation by a lieutenant in Burgoyne's British
regiment attributed Jane’s death to a stray shot fired by Americans in an attempt to rescue
her. In a very short time, however, the powerful and horrible image of scalping
overshadowed the shooting, which in contrast would be a manner of death possibly more
commonplace.


95. James Phinney Baxter, A.M. The British Invasion from the North. The
Campaigns of Generals Carleton and Burgoyne From Canada, 1776–1777. With the Journal
of Lieut. William Digby, of the 53d, or Shropshire Regiment of Foot, Munsell’s Historical
Series No. 16 (Albany, New York: Joel Munsell’s Sons, 1887), 236. Baxter's notes to Lt.
Digby's journal claim that General Fraser's postmortem confirmed that American bullets
killed McCrea. General Morgan Lewis testified that McCrea's body was found with "three
distinct gunshot wounds." Approximately a century after the murder, when McCrea's body
was exhumed and moved to a different grave, no "mark of a tomahawk or injury of any kind
was found upon the skull."

96. Baxter (Digby), The British Invasion from the North, 235, note 175.

97. Edgerton, "The Murder of Jane McCrea," 481-492, includes images of Jane
Barlow’s description of the murder of Lucinda in *The Columbiad* follows:

She starts, with eyes upturn'd and fleeting breath, 661
In their raised axes views her instant death,
Spreads her white hands to heaven in frantic prayer,
Then runs to grasp their knees and crouches there.
Her hair, half lost along the shrubs she past,
Rolls in loose tangles round her lovely waist;
Her kerchief torn betrays the globes of snow
That heave responsive to her weight of woe.
Does all this eloquence suspend the knife?
Does no superior bribe contest her life?
There does: the scalps by British gold are paid; 670
A long-hair’d scalp adorns that heavenly head;
And comes the sacred spoil from friend or foe,
No marks distinguish and no man can know.
With calculating pause and demon grin,
They seize her hands and thro her face divine
Drive the descending ax; the shriek she sent
Attain’d her lover’s ear; he thither bent
With all the speed his wearied limbs could yield,
Whirl’d his keen blade and stretcht upon the field 680
The yelling fiends; who there disputing stood
Her gory scalp, their horrid prize of blood.
He sunk delirious on her lifeless clay
And past, in starts of sense, the dreadful day.98

In Vanderlyn’s painting, the murder takes place under a strong, erect tree. The action and the setting are similar to images from American and French popular culture in which loyalists were violently punished or killed under the shelter of a liberty tree or guillotined on a stage set for the masses to see (figs. 17 and 18). In America, the liberty tree symbolically protected criminal actions as necessary steps to win the rights of freedom

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from tyranny. In France, sixty thousand liberty trees were planted throughout the country, and from their branches hung banners with slogans of the revolution.99

The Native Americans in Vanderlyn’s painting could represent Britain’s corrupt and powerful presence in the revolution, but they could have also reminded the French audience of the revolutionary Jacobins, whose extremist views against the monarchy resulted in the execution by guillotine of thousands of French who remained loyal to the ancient regime.100 For viewers and readers directly familiar with the French Revolution, scalping might perhaps be considered an indigenous American version of the guillotine. McCrea’s kneeling pose, face in profile, and hair, long and taut in the grip of the Mohawk, are indicative of the scalping she is about to receive, but also refer to the theater of execution popular during the Terror (1793–1794). Images of women pleading on their knees for their life to be spared or for male family members to be spared from death by guillotine were common (figs. 19 and 20). Engravings of decapitated heads held high after meeting the guillotine were symbolic not only of revolutionary victory over the monarchy, but also of the growing power of the state (fig. 21).101 Generally, if perhaps somewhat simplistically, it has been accepted that Vanderlyn’s Jane McCrea represents the virtuous


patriot cause in opposition to the evil tyranny of the British.\textsuperscript{102} In France, however, Jane’s
dress could have been recognized for its Directoire styling. During the decade of the 1790s,
dress signified the political leanings of the wearer.\textsuperscript{103} Red, white and blue were the dominant
colors for official deputies of the Directoire (1795–1799), and costumes were to include: "a
‘French’ coat of ‘national blue,’ a tricolor belt, a scarlet cloak à la grecque, and a velvet hat
with tricolor aigrette."\textsuperscript{104} Female revolutionaries wore a red sash, similar to that worn by
Vanderlyn’s Jane (which has a faded pink coloration now), giving her the essence of a
revolutionary struck down in search of her independence.\textsuperscript{105} It could have been risky or
naïve for Vanderlyn to paint ambiguous comparisons to early revolutionary struggles during
first few months of Napoleon’s self-proclaimed Empire. In a wish to please American and
French viewers, Vanderlyn’s French notes may not have provided a focused statement, but
it very well could have been viewed not only as a representation of the polar opposites of
“good” (colonists) versus “evil” Britain, but also of natural and untamed savagery in conflict
with civilized society.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{102} Oedel, “John Vanderlyn,” 220; and Edgerton, "The Murder of Jane McCrea," 487.

\textsuperscript{103} “Revolutionaries wanted to break with the system of invidious social
distinctions, but they continued to believe that dress revealed something about the person.
Dress was, as it were, politically transparent: you could tell a person's political character
from the way he or she dressed.” Hunt, Politics, Culture and Class, 74-86.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 79.

\textsuperscript{105} Madelyn Gutwirth, The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation
in the French Revolutionary Era (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992),
290.

\textsuperscript{106} Oedel, “John Vanderlyn,” 228. Oedel cites Barlow’s Preface regarding his
desire “that true and useful ideas of glory may be implanted in the minds of men [in
America]” and refers to Edgerton’s interpretation of Vanderlyn’s “classic struggle between
Jane McCrea's death, whether inflicted by gunshot or scalping or both, was violent. Her body was "mangled," a descriptive term which could have referred to the scalping but is more likely to be a euphemism for rape. Surprisingly, rape was not uncommon during the American Revolution and was blamed on soldiers as well as on Native Americans. Three women in New Jersey reported rapes by British soldiers during the winter before Jane’s death. Victims of rape suffered societal ruin, and they would leave their homes to prevent the denigration of their families. In other words, victims of rape were marked as immoral. American accounts—including news articles, General Gates in his letter to Burgoyne, and Barlow in his poem—are reserved in describing her rape and do not fully accuse Jane of immorality. Barlow indicates her struggle by remarking that her hair is caught in the shrubs and hangs loose around her waist, her dress is torn and exposes her breasts, or “globes of snow / That heave responsive to her weight of woe.” Smirke’s engraving stays with the tone of reserve, indicating Jane’s struggle by the fallen bonnet next to her feet.

the forces of order and virtue and those of chaos and evil.”


European novels offer accounts of McCrea’s rape as sensationalism. For example, in the 1784 Hilliard-d'Auberteuil novel, noted previously on page 22, Native Americans have captured Jane and her servant, and stripped them and tied them to trees. The servant, Betsy, is killed first. The captors sexually abuse Jane: "Each of them laid claim to her when Kiashuta, the most renowned of their chiefs, arrived from a hunt. He approached her and was touched by pity," noting that her hair was "long enough to serve as a veil for her modesty." The Hilliard-d'Auberteuil novel is a fictionalized and provocative account, whose veracity one should consider with great caution. Yet it reveals a contemporary social view of what might have happened to Jane in her last moments and allows the character Kiashuta to gently cover her nudity and, possibly, her shame, something Barlow and Smirke also seem to do, but Vanderlyn does not. Jane’s long hair is frequently a part of her physical description. In the Vanderlyn painting, Jane’s hair is long and loose, perhaps an indication of her loose morality and certainly a part of her beauty and sexuality. It hangs freely behind her, but is caught up in the hands of her captor and murderers. In the Smirke engraving, Lucinda’s hair falls intertwined in her dress fabric behind her back, allowing one of her captors to grasp only a small handful. As noted by Namias, Jane’s “hair and scalp are powerful symbols of the mind and body, both her rational and sexual features” and are important symbols of her ability to test independence by seeking out her Tory lover. The rape and scalping represent male conquest over her; her hair is a prize for the victor.

Vanderlyn incorporates motifs of rape that would be familiar to an academically trained artist, including the assailant grasping the female’s wrist, and the victim’s loose

110. Hilliard-d’Auberteuil, Mis Mac Rae, Book III.

hair and torn or loose clothing. The Mohawk who appears ready to deal the fatal blow to Jane grasps the wrist of her open hand, a symbol of his criminal intention. Her open hand is a plea for peace (also seen in fig. 12, David’s Intervention of the Sabine Women). Her left hand is raised and grasps the assailant’s arm in an attempt to resist the attack, and, along with her sublimated pose and fearful expression, signifies her distress. Jane’s dress is torn open at the bodice, indicative of the struggle. The nipple of her right breast is exposed. Vanderlyn seems to quote several artistic narratives, among them David’s of the Sabine women intervention in the war of their fathers and husbands (resulting in a truce that legally transfers authority for their rights from father to husband),113 Poussin’s, of the Massacre of the Innocents, c. 1626 (fig. 22) (the Biblical story of the murder of a helpless woman),114 and Titian’s, of the death of Lucretia (fig. 23) (which transformed a tragic incident of war and of romance between two different houses into an affair of state).115 Viewers might also be reminded of the highly publicized allegations of Marie-

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Antoinette’s sexual misconduct before her death, seen in numerous engravings of the time. 116

Barlow’s Lucinda is not as strong or independent as the Sabine women or Lucretia. She pleads for Heartly to stay with her even though battle calls him away: “And wilt thou leave me [in the camp] for that clangorous call? / Traced I these deserts but to see thee fall?” 117 Heartly agreed to wear a white plume in his hat so that she could follow him on the battlefield. As she watched for him:

She thought he fell; and wild with fearless air,
She left the camp to brave the woodland war,
Made a long circuit, all her friends to shun
And wander'd wide beneath the falling sun… 118

In a twist of fate, Heartly had finished battle and returned to camp. When he realized she was not there, he searched for her all through the night until “…the shriek she sent / Attain’d her lover’s ear…” 119 and ran to find her but was too late to save her. In illustrating Barlow’s words, one can only wonder if Vanderlyn read the poem at all. Vanderlyn painted a plume of red, not a plume of white. In this, he might have been making a deliberate reference to the red plume in the hat of French soldiers in America or serving in Napoleon’s armies (fig. 24), or he could have referred to the red plume affixed to the hat of soldiers in

116. Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 108-109, 114-119, 121-122. Hunt’s analysis of Marie-Antoinette’s public trial and execution claims that the queen was cast as the antithesis of the good republican mother who should have been serving her family rather than operating in the public realm.
118. Ibid., 627-630.
119. Ibid., 677-678.
the Continental Artillery, a possibility which supports the Edgerton theory that Vanderlyn’s
Jones is Americanized.\textsuperscript{120} In yet another enigmatic nod to patriotism, Vanderlyn’s Mohawks
wear red, white, and blue feathers tucked into the bands on their heads. As noted, it has
come to be widely accepted that Vanderlyn painted David Jones/Heartly in a blue coat, in
order to portray him also as an American patriot, and so perhaps to simplify the meaning of
the story as a whole. Yet just as the dress of Jane McCrea is not an exact reproduction of any
patriotic garb in France or America, the uniform of David Jones is not from any particular
regiment. Although Americans nearly always refer to British soldiers in the revolution as
‘red coats,’ the facts of the time indicate that a Loyalist soldier was likely to wear a uniform
to designate his country or area of origin, and the rotation of uniforms could include coats of
red, blue, green or white.\textsuperscript{121} A contemporary account acknowledges that some soldiers
serving the British flag in the American Revolution wore blue cloaks (a type of overcoat).\textsuperscript{122}
Even though French soldiers did not fight on American soil at the time of Jane’s murder,
French observers of Vanderlyn’s painting could have seen Jones’s blue coat as a
representation of France’s aid to American colonists in their fight against Britain.\textsuperscript{123}

Barlow goes further to distance any immorality Jane’s story may have conveyed.

Early in \textit{The Columbiad}, Barlow situates Lucinda in the British camp to wait for Heartly,

\textsuperscript{120} Henry Loomis Nelson, “Army Uniforms in the United States,” \textit{Harper’s
Weekly} 34, No. 1732 (March 1, 1890): supplement, accessed August 7, 2011, Google

\textsuperscript{121} René Chartrand, \textit{The French Army in the American War of Independence}

\textsuperscript{122} Blumenthal, \textit{Women Camp Followers}, 27-28.

\textsuperscript{123} Chartrand, \textit{The French Army}, 24-25 and 34.
indicating their betrothal and her moral intention to be married. “Housed in the camp he left his blooming bride,” Barlow wrote. Camps of the revolution were comprised of soldiers, women and children (generally one woman for every 4.5 men). As an alternative to awaiting the results of war alone, large numbers of women and families left their homes to accompany the armies – British or American – and to provide services to the soldiers. In American camps, women were regarded more highly than British camp followers: “poor, but never prostitutes.” Descriptions of women in the British camps where Jane would have reported were not complimentary, noting drunkenness and filth and an overall difficult way of life. Barlow writes dialogue intended to instill respect around the sordid life of camps and perhaps the action and consequences of this single woman’s choice to leave her home to marry a loyalist. Lucinda reminds Heartly that their union has patriarchal approval as well as that of the mythological god of marriage, Hymen. She pleads, “My father said blest Hymen here should join / With sacred Love to make Lucinda thine.”


125. Blumenthal, Women Camp Followers, 19.

126. British and American armies were comprised of Hessian, Dutch, Spanish and French soldiers in addition to colonists and British citizens. Women camp followers were indispensable for their care of sick and wounded soldiers and for cooking, washing and mending for the troops. Ibid., 21-22.

127. DePauw and Hunt, Remember the Ladies, 89. DePauw and Hunt also note (14) that “Women who had been 'ruined', because of rape during the Revolution or because the young men they expected to marry deserted them, would feel obliged to leave home to save their parents from disgrace.” Jane had much pressure on her to make the liaison successful.

128. Ibid., 443-44.
Historian Jay Fliegleman is one author who has interpreted the story of Jane McCrea’s death and legacy in political terms. He writes: "Here was the great scene of sentimental fiction horribly come alive: the tyrannical parent sending his ferocious minister to deny his child, his loyal Tory child, the sacred nuptial rites.‖129 By choosing to live as a Loyalist (or Tory), Jane was enacting two interwoven debates of the revolution: personal liberty and political choice. Her intention to marry Jones is key to the dichotomy of American and European treatment of her as a character in fiction and in painting.

Jane’s father had died, and she lived with the family of her patriot brother. As British troops marched closer, Jane left her brother’s home for the presumed safe house of a Loyalist friend, Mrs. Sarah Fraser McNeil, a widowed cousin living near Fort Edward, New York, in the path of the British army.130 She may have been forced to evacuate her brother’s home due to the impending battles in the area.131 Some accounts, however, state that McCrea chose to leave because she had received a note from Jones and was en route to marry him; she intended to stay at Mrs. McNeil’s house until their Sabbath Day, i.e., Sunday, rendezvous.132 To leave her family home, unmarried, indicated willingness not only to defy her brother’s (that is, male) authority but also to exercise personal independence and deviation from her family’s patriotic political stance. Jane had not only literally crossed the


132. Baxter (Digby), *The British Invasion from the North*, 236; Wilson, *The Life of Jane McCrea*, 89; and Furneaux, *The Battle of Saratoga*, 97-99. Digby tells us that David Jones had invited McCrea and other ladies to visit the British camp and Lake George, and to ask her to marry him.
line into a battle zone, but she also moved into another social caste of women who disobeyed the political beliefs of the males of the family. Yet independent choice was one of the core values of the American Revolution and one of Barlow’s cherished republican virtues. Jane’s declaration of independence from patriarchal authority can be considered a political decision analogous to the American break from Britain. The declaration of marriage associated with the story eliminated the possibility of moral scandal and made it politically easy to quickly blame the British for killing “their own,” which Jane became upon her betrothal.

Marriage customs were changing in the eighteenth century, though not so quickly that a woman in revolutionary America was free, without judgment or restraint, to choose her own partner, or, indeed, form her own political opinions. According to Fleigelman, "The debate as to whether marriage was essentially a property transfer between father-in-law and suitor or a sacred contract between lovers was a very real one in eighteenth-century America—one that reflected a larger debate as to whether property or personal rights were more sacred, as to whether the possession of the former or the exercise of the latter conferred upon men a more real independence. Inevitably, the debate over the proper balance of those rights was to divide rebels and Tories." Joel Barlow had some experience with this subject: he married Ruth Baldwin in secret in January 1781, while


134. Fliegelman, Prodigals and Pilgrims, 135.
serving as a chaplain in the army. He wrote to her father a year later: “To crowd himself into a family is what no Gentleman of my feelings ever will do; but to take a daughter from any family upon the principle of mutual affection is a right always given by the God of nature wherever he has [been] given that affection.” In The Columbiad, Barlow stated his wish that moral and political nature would unite in the “importance of republican institutions” and would be fundamental to “public and private happiness.” Barlow’s beliefs might have heightened his sympathy for the real Jane McCrea, even though, as a Tory, her political sentiments would not have concurred with his.

Jane McCrea disregarded her father’s and brother’s political affiliation with the patriot cause, stepped outside normal female cultural traditions in order to meet her loyalist lover, and then was raped. Yet the initial contemporary public response to her victimization and alignment with Britain through betrothal favored the view that Jane was enacting the "republican" gift of choice and independence, in historian Jan Lewis’s words, modeling the “post-patriarchal world, [when] citizens could govern themselves…” free of "tyrannical interference.” Other historians (Namias and Sheardy) have argued that McCrea’s fate reinforced the necessary dependence of women upon civilized men for protection and control of her independent nature, and that Vanderlyn’s Jane exemplifies the powerless

135. Ford, Joel Barlow, 20.

female whose sexual promiscuity resulted in her death (Sheardy).\textsuperscript{137} Engels and Goodale argue that Americans felt overwhelming sorrow for her and an urge to see her vindicated.\textsuperscript{138}

Jane’s choice to be free of the political beliefs of the men in her family would not be looked upon lightly in France under the new rules of the 1804 \textit{Code civil des Français}. The legal authority of women in matters of politics and property was an issue in France, too, but the revolutionary spirit of selfless nationalism—promoted in the French Revolution, dramatized in David’s \textit{Sabines}, and central to neoclassicism—was no longer the norm in France. The French Senate met in March 1804 to approve the \textit{Code civil des Français}, or French Civil Code. Although the Code preceded the proclamation of Napoleon as Emperor of France in May, it was known as the \textit{Code Napoléon} by 1807. The Code restored a prerevolutionary “natural order,” granting to men the authority over women in matters of property and divorce, and reinstated male dominance in marriage. The character of Jane McCrea as seen in terms of the Napoleonic Code (and as dramatized in the Hilliard-d’Auberteuil novel) may have exhibited “selfish” independence instead of selfless nationalism and deserved to be chastised for trading in a country’s hard-won political liberty for an unwise and unapproved marital choice.\textsuperscript{139}


\textsuperscript{138} Engels and Goodale, “A Précis on the Rhetoric of Revenge,” 94. Pancake argues an alternative viewpoint: "...Yankee farmers might not be especially enthusiastic about avenging the sweetheart of a Tory, rather inclining to the view that Jenny got what was coming to her." Pancake, \textit{1777: The Year of the Hangman}, 153-154.

\textsuperscript{139} Namais, \textit{White Captives}, 121 and 123.
The unsettled place of women in the political transformations of the American and French Revolutions and the rise of the Napoleonic empire in 1804 contributes to the ambiguity surrounding interpretations of Jane’s actions and is reflected in the variations of her character as the legend evolved. Vanderlyn offered another look at McCrea in a state of limbo, not yet married, no longer single, and no longer under control of a patriarchic household. She could embody a nation independent from monarchical tyrants, a new country where personal happiness was also the natural order, or the tragedy of a woman who, lacking male dominance, made a fateful decision.

Later artists depicted Jane in a plain, flowing white gown that to twenty-first century viewers might suggest a wedding costume, even though the wedding gown as we now know it was a creation of the late-nineteenth century. The indication is that she is morally prepared to give herself to her fiancé, even in the absence of her family/father. Vanderlyn's Jane meets her death in revolutionary red, white, and blue. In her tricolor gown—the national colors of France and of the United States—and its Directoire styling complete with French Revolutionary red sash, she becomes the essence of all of the women who consciously or tragically became part of the struggles associated with war and power. Jane could be a symbol of either country in the struggle for power with Britain, and a reminder to both American and French viewers of the moral consequences of political actions.

Vanderlyn may not have consciously intended to portray issues of feminine morality along with political pluck, but female independence is a part of Jane's story and is intrinsically bound to the political issues surrounding both the American Revolution

and the new French Empire in 1804. Although the historical Jane was a Tory (perhaps more because of love than personal allegiance), the coloration and style of her dress in the Vanderlyn painting allow us to consider her character as an overtly political symbol of revolutionary liberty.

American interests in setting a broader standard of human rights that would persist constitutionally may have prevented the various American accounts of McCrea’s murder from directing attention to Jane's Loyalist conversion or to her decision to exercise her right to marry whomever she pleased, as European accounts do. It is difficult to find an American report of McCrea’s murder that holds her accountable for a political or moral indiscretion, from 1777 throughout the nineteenth century, even though there were numerous reasons to expect popular opinion to mention something about Jane’s choices. Had she survived captivity and rape, Jane McCrea surely risked a life of disgrace rather than identity as the heroine she became.

Vanderlyn’s portrayal of Jane’s story does not only indicate struggle, rape, and her impending death. It also reminds us that Jane McCrea was in the process of what was effectively a defection, showing as it does a solitary female in the woods, fleeing family to unite with her betrothed. The daughter and sister of patriots, Jane would have been expected to follow her family’s political values. Instead, she defied social and political convention for personal independence/ freedom. The war for independence, seen through the eyes of a republican, enabled her to pursue marriage as a sacred contract between lovers, at once a romantic notion and a political defiance of old social customs, or at the very least the customs of Britain and of France in the ancien regime.
Vanderlyn painted with a well-developed understanding of both American and French iconography. Jane, breast exposed and arms raised to fight off the murderous attack, resembles the peace-keeping mothers of David’s *Intervention of the Sabine Women* in stance and placement in the frontal plane. Dressed in her tricolor gown, she could be a symbol of America or of France in a struggle for power with Britain, and a reminder to both Americans and French viewers of the moral consequences of political actions. Yet, the high pitch of horror and tension in the painting and in the Barlow’s poem are evidence of the new era of Romanticism even while they also conjure French caricatures of impotence and death by guillotine from the decade of the revolution when Vanderlyn was a student. As Oedel summarizes, the moral of Vanderlyn’s painting is “the denunciation of British depravity, during both the Revolution and the current war with France, and the ultimate triumph of innocent republicanism over corrupt monarchism.”

Conclusion

The murder of Jane McCrea took hold in the psyche of Americans as a symbol of British tyranny and evidence of the kind of atrocities that might be committed under British rule. Frances K. Pohl and June Namias are correct in their assessments that Jane McCrea “[ran] off with a Tory soldier [and] was transformed into a martyred revolutionary heroine” and “functioned not only as an individual heroine but also as a symbol of colonial women and of the nation at large.”

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Enlightenment and American Revolution—she chose to rebel against her father's political wishes, chose her own fiancé, and left her father's house—may have given her story a subtext that helped propel it into legend. American accounts of her death do not condemn her for seeking her true love nor for her disavowal of her family’s allegiance. Her independence may have helped place her in the path of her tragic fate, but this choice, and the acceptance of it, points to the transition from the mind set of the Enlightenment to that of Romanticism, and from the duty to the state emphasized in neoclassicism to the duty to individual will stressed in Romanticism. Her story also symbolized issues of personal independence debated throughout the early years of the American nation.143

In his depiction of this story and legend, Vanderlyn is at once a student who demonstrates dutiful adherence to accepted form—as seen in the firm brush, vivid color, nationalistic costume, classical composition, and political iconography—and an artist who paints a paean to the memory, emotion, and passion of the tragedies and sacrifices that he knew firsthand from the revolutions of two burgeoning nations. His portrayal of Jane as a martyr to nationalism and personal freedom, rather than a bride slaughtered at the altar, is a strong statement of the American spirit that fought for democracy and the key tenets of republicanism in the first decade of the nineteenth century.

Vanderlyn’s heroine—whether symbolic of society and politics in America or France or both—is not merely the tragic victim of war described by Barlow and illustrated by Smirke and other artists. Rather, as I have shown for Vanderlyn, Jane’s

struggle represents the strength of resistance, and the death of the *ancien régime*, in both America and France.
Bibliography


published in Philadelphia, 1784. The original place of publication is considered false, probably published in Brussels.


Figure 1. John Vanderlyn, *The Murder of Jane McCrea*, 1804. Oil on canvas, 32 ½ x 26 ½ inches. Purchased by the Wadsworth Atheneum (1855.4).


Figure 3. François-André Vincent, *Zeuxis choisissant pour modèle les plus belles filles de la ville de Crotone*, Salon of 1789. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Figure 4. François-André Vincent, *Guillaume Tell renversant la barque sur laquelle le gouverneur Gessler traversait le lac de Lucerne*, Salon of 1795, no. 528. Musée des Augustins, Toulouse.

Figure 5. John Vanderlyn, *Portrait of Joel Barlow*, 1798. Charcoal and pencil on paper, 20 x 15.2 cm. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. (Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joel Barlow, NPG.76.31)

Accessed June 23, 2011. Search URL:
http://npgportraits.si.edu/eMuseumNPG/code/emuseum.asp?newpage=NPG.

Inscription: “A distant view of the falls of Niagara including both branches of The Island and Adjacent Shores, taken from the vicinity of Indian Ladder. To the Society of Fine Arts of New York this print is respectively inscribed by their most obedient humble servant, John Vanderlyn. August 1804.”


Figure 8. *Wounded Niobid*, ca. 440 B.C. Parian marble, 1.49 m. From the Gardens of Sallust, in the area of Piazza Sallustio, Rome. Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome. (Inv. 72274)

Figure 9. *Apollo Belvedere*, 2nd century A.D. Marble, 2.15 m. Roman copy of Greek bronze statue by Leochares 350 - 325 B.C. Museo Pio-Clementino, Musei Vaticani, Vatican City. (Vatican B 92 or 1015)

Figure 10. Hagesandros, Athenedoros, and Polydoros, *Laocoön and his sons* (also known as the *Laocoön Group*), early 1st century B.C. Marble, copy after an Hellenistic original from ca. 200 BC. Found in the Baths of Trajan, 1506. Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican Museums. (Inv.1059, Inv.1064 and Inv. 1067)

Figure 11. Jacques-Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784. Oil on canvas, 3.3 x 4.25 m. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Inv. 3692)

Accessed August 3, 2011. URL: http://www.louvre.fr/llv/oeuvres/detail_notice.jsp;jsessionid=TR4QL462cLpnT3Mcx5Lk52Fb2KY8zGDtpn3VsZDCCx8KpmlmLmt!-110976858?CONTENT%3C%3Ecnt_id=10134198673225718&CURRENT_LLV_NOTICE%3C%3Ecnt_id=10134198673225718&FOLDER%3C%3Efolder_id=9852723696500815&bmlLocale=en.
Figure 12. Jacques-Louis David, *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*, 1799. Oil on canvas, 3.85 m x 5.22 m. Musée du Louvre, Paris. (Inv. 3691)

Figure 13. Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770. Oil on canvas, 152.6 x 214.5 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Transfer from the Canadian War Memorials, 1921. (Gift of the 2nd Duke of Westminster, England, 1918, no. 8007)

Figure 14. Sarratoga. Dessiné par Fauvel, Gravé par Godefroy de l’Académie Impériale et Royale de Vienne &c., [1784?]. Etching, 7 5/8 x 8 x 1/2 in. From Ponce, Recueil d’estampes représentant...(Paris, 1784?), plate 4 (Collection de Vinck 1167).


Figure 17. Anon., *The Bostonian’s Paying the Excise-Man, or Tarring & Feathering*, 1774. Mezzotint, colored, 33 x 25.4 cm. Printed for Rob[er]t Sayer & J[ohn] Bennett, Map & Printseller, No. 53, Fleet Street as the Act directs. (BM 5232b)


Figure 18. Anon., *Execution of Louis XVI*. Engraving. From *Révolutions de Paris*, no. 185, 19-26 January 1793.

Figure 19. Jean Gabriel Peltier, frontispiece from *Le Martirologe: ou, l'Histoire des martyrs de la Revolution* (Coblentz, Paris: chez Artaud), 1792.

Figure 20. Charles Benazech, *Adieux de Louis XVI à sa famille au Temple*, Janvier 1793. Oil on canvas, 42 x 56 cm. Musée national du Château de Versailles.


Figure 21. Villeneuve, *Food for Thought for the Crowned Jugglers*, 1793. Engraving. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale.

Figure 22. Nicolas Poussin, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 1626-1627. Oil on canvas, 97 × 131 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville, Paris. (Inv. PDUT00879)

Figure 23. Tiziano Vecellio (Titian), *Tarquin and Lucretia*, ca.1571. Oil on canvas, 188.9 x 145.1 cm. The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK.
