

# The Tracy Mug: Porcelain, Iconography and City Politics in Dr Wall's Worcester

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## Introduction

One of the most intriguing exhibits in the 18th century gallery of the Museum of Worcester Porcelain is the so-called Tracy Mug, commemorating the famous election victory by Robert Tracy in the city of Worcester in 1747/48, shortly before the opening of the Worcester Porcelain works in 1751. Tradition has it that the curious design and painting on the mug are the handiwork of Dr John Wall, a leading figure amongst the fifteen partners who set up the firm.

A close analysis of the wide ranging—if not always satisfactory – available evidence connected with the mug provides a fascinating key hole through which we can examine the world into which Worcester porcelain was born two hundred and fifty years ago. This article will seek to:

- i) Explain the origins and iconography of one of the earliest political commemoratives on English porcelain
- ii) Show the interplay between artefacts, local newspapers, prints, poll books, architecture and the contemporary political scene
- iii) Examine the way in which porcelain found a role alongside other material possessions in not only reflecting the taste of their owners but also their political allegiances

Inevitably, restrictions upon space will limit my ability to deal with the broader context of mid-eighteenth century Worcester, which I examined in my lecture at the International Ceramics Fair in 2005 and which was published in the 2006 catalogue, and therefore I have endeavoured as far as possible to avoid repeating material which is to be found there

## The Tracy Mug

In 1930 H E Rhodes gave a full description of the Tracy Mug in a paper delivered to the English Porcelain Circle and subsequently printed in the Transactions of that body in the following year.<sup>1</sup>

*"It is of the cylindrical type, with spreading base, and square-cut, grooved handle. On the base is an incised satire cross, and a cut in the foot-ring. The paste is white, and the glaze thin and even. The front of the mug is painted with a column surmounted by a coat-of-arms in colours. Upon the plinth the following inscription is pencilled in black:*

*"Erected to commemorate ye gratitude/Freemen of Worcester owe/Robert Tracy Esqr/who/ restored their Liberty/by defeating/an arbitrary power/in the year 1747."*

*On one side of the column, pencilled in red, is Hercules wearing a lion's skin, crushing Antaeus in his arms; and in a scroll above, the word 'Conquest'. On the other side is a lion licking the hand of Androcles, and, in a scroll above, the word 'Gratitude'.*

*It occurred to me that the column might have been taken from a monument to Tracy in Worcester, but enquiry showed that this assumption was groundless".*

*(Fig. 1)*

To this we might add that the execution of the design described above is naïve and not typical of an experienced enameller. The brush strokes are scratch-like and differ from the smoother application of paint to be found on the oriental scenes most typical of "scratch cross" ware (the name



Figure 1. The two sides of the Tracy Mug

given to some of the earliest of the output of the factory, characterised by potters' nicks or crosses made on the underside of the pieces). The conscientious, if somewhat crude, attempt at perspective in the checker board flooring of the scene involving Androcles also contrasts with the majority of "scratch cross" scenes where figures, animals, plant and furniture "float" in space or where landscape is deliberately "flattened" in imitation of Chinese style.

Whilst far from conclusive, comparisons have been made between the figure painting on the mug and that in Wall's rather stiff portrayal of human anatomy in his numerous engravings and oil paintings of classical and mythological subjects, some of which are also on display in the Museum of Worcester Porcelain. The engravings of Wall used in Richard Owen Cambridge's "The Scribleriad" and Dionysius Longinus "On the Sublime" show points of comparison and in particular one could draw attention to a figure painted by Wall in a gouache study of the "The Great Siege of Troy" in the archives of the Museum of Worcester Porcelain. (Fig. 2) The figure of Heracles is one of the first examples of a human subject on Worcester porcelain which does not purport to be an oriental character; even though, as is frequently cited in standard texts, much of Worcester's chinoiserie depicts figures with decidedly European features. Moreover, as will become apparent, the iconography is so specific that it seems unlikely to have been regular factory output designed for wider sale, a suggestion strengthened by the fact that it would appear to be a unique piece, perhaps presented to the victor by the fac-



Figure 2. Detail of gouache depicting the Great Horse of Troy by Dr Wall (Museum of Worcester Porcelain). Compare with the depiction of Androcles

tory. Its scratch cross mark and styling would also tend to confirm the belief that this is one of the earliest documentary pieces of Worcester porcelain from the 1752-54 period. Given that Tracy was ousted in less than glorious circumstances in 1754 through failing to stand in the election of that year, it is likely that the mug was produced no later than this date. (Tracy did go on to stand in the election of 1761 but was beaten into third place and was unsuccessful in an appeal)

More speculatively, the scene involving Androcles perhaps offers another clue in support of the tradition that Dr Wall was responsible for the design if not the execution of the Tracy Mug. It is rather curious that behind the figure of Androcles stands a brick wall which not only breaks up the



Figure 3. An invitation to join the Constitution Club 1745

continuity of the design but also appears rather anachronistic in the pseudo-classical setting of the scene. If there is a deliberate purpose to the choice of image, and much of what follows is devoted to demonstrating that all such imagery is anything but accidental, then this may well be a punning reference to Wall, a “hidden signature” by the partner who may have used his influence in the first days of the factory to have commissioned the presentation piece for his MP shortly after production began. As this article will attempt to reveal, there are significant social and political connections between Tracy, Dr Wall and the other original partners of 1751 which can illuminate our understanding not only of the mug but the motives behind the establishment of the porcelain factory.

At the heart of this thesis lies the Constitution Club, a body initially created in 1745 to raise subscriptions to provide troops to defend the country against the invading Jacobites of the Young Pretender. (Fig. 3) Wall's father-in-law, Martin Sandys, was a leading light in the organisation and, in the aftermath of Culloden, he appears to have mobilised his members to turn their attention to domestic Tory opponents who were accused of being half-hearted in their support of the Hanoverian dynasty in its moment of crisis and guilty of corrupting the local body politic through the wholesale conversion of neighbouring Tory gentry into honorary freemen with the right to vote in city elections prior to the poll of 1747. The Constitution Club, with its decidedly Whig and Masonic overtones, was to play a vital role in the dissemination of partisan political iconography through the erection of temporary commemorative structures in the city of Worcester to celebrate

Tracy's victory in 1748 and the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1749. An examination of the poll-books and the Vernon electoral expenses of the period also reveal those future Worcester partners who can be traced (nine out of fifteen) show strong signs of being Whig voters or even activists, giving further credence to the notion that the political as well as commercial ambitions underpinned the establishment of the factory.

### The Election of 1747 and the Tracy Arch 1748

Rhodes, quoting a passage from the London Penny Post of July 13 1747 (discovered by R.W. Binns in his “A Century of Potting in the City of Worcester”) went on to describe how Tracy, in a particularly bitter and corrupt contest, had been narrowly beaten into third place in the borough election of that year by his Whig running mate Sir Thomas Vernon and their Tory rival Thomas Geers Winford. (Vernon 1557, Winford 1074, Tracy 1027) However, on appeal, the returning officer was deemed to have illegally denied a vote to 72 citizens, Winford was unseated and on February 11 1748 Tracy installed in his place.

Not surprisingly, the more partisan Whig interest felt outraged by the attempted gerrymandering and doubly jubilant by their victory. In defiance of a prohibition advertised in the “Worcester Journal” on June 2 1748 by the mayor and justices, a temporary triumphal arch of lathe and plaster was raised by the Tracy interest on June 11 to coincide with the accession day celebrations of George II and provide an appropriate focus for the newly elected MP entering the city in triumph.

Thus Rhodes' instinct about the existence of an arch to celebrate the victory was correct and, as long ago as 1945, an



Figure 4. The Guild Hall Worcester

illustration of the monument in question was made available in the 1945 Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society by Alex Macdonald. However, as so often appears to happen, the gulf between the priorities of collectors and historians intervened to prevent the link between mug and monument being established. Macdonald postulates that the architect Thomas White was the designer of the arch (a speculation that seems reasonable when compared with the pediments on his two more enduring monuments in the city, the Guildhall and Britannia House.) Collectors of Worcester transfer printed ware will readily identify the image of Fame blowing a trumpet above the arch and the ubiquity of this figure in print and on architecture should serve to remind us of the extensive borrowing of

porcelain design from other media. (Fig. 4)

The illustration of the arch we are told was engraved by Isaac Taylor who was later forced to leave the city because of threats made by the supporters of the Tory candidate. (Whilst there is proof of Taylor's removal to London from Worcester; there is, to my knowledge, no confirmation of the reason given above and there is some question mark against the dating. Sheila O'Connell of the Prints Department at the British Museum suggests that, on current evidence, Taylor would have been only about seventeen in 1747 and probably still serving an apprenticeship. This might explain why Taylor's name does not appear in the poll-book of 1747. Interestingly enough, Taylor was then according to one source, employed by Edward Cave on the Gentleman's Magazine. Cave was one of the original fifteen partners of Worcester porcelain, promoting the establishment of the fac-



Figure 5. The Tracy Arch

representing Justice, the rape of Sabrina, and a lady reclining against a sun-dial. The niches contain other allegorical statues above which are on the left the arms of the Tracy family and on the right their crest a winged chapeau. Before the left-hand niche is a plaque showing three men standing around an open coffin inscribed H.F> ob. 11 Feb.

1747 AE 99

"H.F." presumably means Honorary Freeman. The plaque below the right hand niche shows a gentleman handing scrolls to two poor men – perhaps conferring honorary freedoms on them. At the foot are

two more plaques: on the left a three headed dog chained, and on the right a figure which I cannot interpret. The following is a translation of the eloquent Latin inscription at the foot.

*'When the civil liberty of the people of Worcester was lately in jeopardy and likely soon to perish utterly, through force, fraud, threats, bribes, and lastly by the scandalous enrolment of strangers among the freemen, a public meeting of the citizens was held and erected this arch of triumph to Robert Tracy, armiger, the restorer and defender of their civic rights. For with his help the yoke of ancient tyranny was shaken off, and the old laws of suffrage and the resolutions of the City Council were at last happily restored'*

Quick reference to the Tracy mug will demonstrate beyond any reasonable doubt that the painter of the mug was clearly copying an engraving of the figures on the 1748 arch and the scene on the mug is quite clearly that of Hercules wrestling with Antaeus. The Numean lion skin on Hercules

tory in 1752 with an announcement about its wares and showing the famous engraving of the new works. If Taylor really was driven out of Worcester by Tory opponents then his adoption by Cave is consistent with the thesis advanced by this article that there is considerable evidence to believe that the original partners were associated with the Whig cause in the city.

### Interpreting the Arch

Returning to the arch itself Macdonald gave a full description of much of it but was unable to interpret some of the smaller detail. Most crucially, he misinterpreted the figures topping the arch, perhaps explaining why it has taken so long for the two images to be reunited. (Fig. 5)

*"In the pediment, set between the inscriptions "Long Live King George the Second" and "To the Preserver of our Rights and Liberties" are the Royal Arms. Above this are statues rep-*

and obviously masculine features of the figure to the left makes it impossible to accept Macdonald's interpretation of the scene representing that of the Rape of Sabrina (the goddess of the river Severn). The implausibility of this interpretation is increased by the internal evidence of his own article which suggests that as part of their dirty tricks in an ugly electoral contest, the local Tories accused Tracy of rape, a slander which was, to their credit, denounced by both Vernon and Winford. It would not have been the best form of political triumphalism, which is so specifically recalled in other details of the arch, to cause citizens of Worcester to recollect this particular accusation levelled against the returning hero! Nor would it make sense to have atop the arch the very act which had, according to the Tracy interest, been averted by his victory.

Closer examination would, however, seem to support Macdonald's interpretation of the scene around the coffin since the date in the caption is that when the election result was reversed. (Prior to the calendar change of 1752, the English dating system would have described February 1748 as 1747). What needs further to be discovered is the reference to the death of Honorary Freemen in their 99th year. If the dating in the arch is consistent, then it would be reasonable to assume that if February 1747 is nowadays termed 1748, then January 1649 (when Charles I was executed) would be regarded as January 1648 by its designer. This would therefore place a ninety-nine year interval between the two events. I have found nothing of note happening within Worcester at this time affecting the status or election of Freemen but, given the evident political tensions within the city and the opposition to the project, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that this arch was designed to be provocative. Highly specula-

tive although it must remain, it could be that an association is being made between the termination of Stuart tyranny and a restoration of civil liberty almost a hundred years later: The corporation is accused of attempting, through its corrupt practices to undo the work of the Parliamentary cause at local level in the same way that "Jacobite" Tories were threatening to do at a national level. The potent Stuart iconography of the corporation's headquarters, the Guildhall, with its demonisation of Cromwell and lack of explicit pro-Hanoverian sentiment, does need some explanation given its construction in the first decade after George I's succession. An event in the following year, also gives some cause to believe that vestigial animosity stretching back to the Civil War period were being played out in a subterranean fashion for much of the following century and were given sudden intensity by the Jacobite crisis of 1745 and the election of 1747.

The plaque on the opposite side of the arch when viewed under a magnifying glass seems to portray a man in a frock coat approaching a seated female figure with what looks like a furled banner behind, leaving me to suspect that the figure is either Britannia or Sabrina demonstrating her gratitude for her saviour. A naked figure in the corner would seem to represent the poverty and calamity that Tracy's victory has averted. In other words, it is possible to see that the twin themes of Conquest and Gratitude on the Tracy Mug may also be derived from the arch.

There are also aspects of the arch which Macdonald does not explore. The two figures above these two plaques which Macdonald does not mention are familiar to collectors of 18th century figurines. To the right, Minerva /Athena –the helmet, shield, breast plate and spear are readily identifiable and as a "peace loving deity who would only borrow arms when

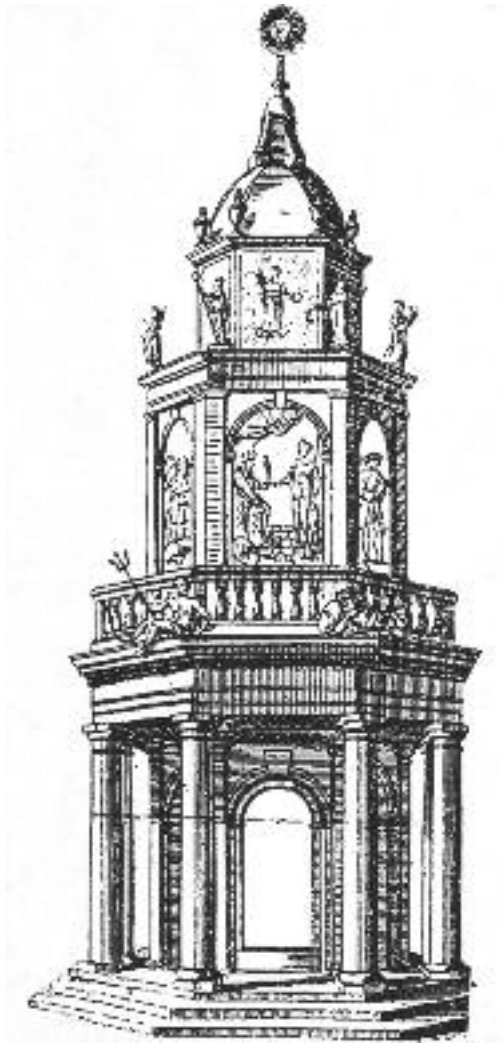


Figure 6. The Peace Edifice of 1749 (*Gentleman's Magazine*)

need arose" she was particularly apposite to a city recovering from an invasion scare and a bitter electoral contest. Rejected by Paris in favour of Aphrodite, Minerva was associated with the Greek cause against Troy, which as explained below, is perhaps of importance in the Whig pedigree of the design. She also aided Hercules in his twelfth and most difficult labour the capture of Cerberus which establishes the coherence of the iconography of the arch and proves that this is no random set of images. Her assistance in helping Perseus slay Medusa resulted in her acquisition of not only the head of the monster, which thereafter decorated her shield, but also of the medicinal bile from the dead Gorgon. This conferred upon the goddess healing powers and the title "Hygieia"; this would have had particular resonance for Dr Wall and his apothecary friend William Davis and indeed it is not surprising to discover than one of the Wall's lost canvases was of the goddess in

this guise. Her patronage of the arts and crafts, including pottery, would signify the benefits to the local economy that will spring from Tracy's election. There is also convincing documentary evidence to suggest that Worcester was suffering a trade depression during the period, thus providing the partners with an important motive in establishing the factory. As a Goddess of Wisdom, Minerva would also represent the triumph of Reason.

To the left is the figure of Juno/Hera bearing a pomegranate for fertility and accompanied by a peacock representing the stars in the firmament, both of which can just about be picked out using a magnifying glass. Like Minerva, Juno had been rejected by Paris and as the protectress of marriage she also had reason to be offended by Helen's flight to Troy. She thus had a double reason for favouring the Greeks in their conflict with the Trojans and persecuting Paris.

The figure of the three headed dog represents Cerberus, and the taming of this beast, along with the many headed hydra, was one of the labours of Hercules set by King Eurystheus. In much Georgian political propaganda, both beasts are used in association with Hercules to represent the defeat of Discord and Distraction. On the opposite side of the arch, where the image is particularly difficult to see, logic might suggest that if one follows the parallel themes of Conquest and Gratitude shown on the Tracy Mug, the barely discernible seated figure might be Charity comforting the poor children.

The Constitution Club went on to commission a further edifice that was constructed on the banks of the Severn in 1749 to accompany a fireworks display in celebration of the peace of 1749. (*Fig. 6*) The *Gentleman's Magazine* of that year described and illustrated in considerable detail the curious

structure replete with Hanoverian and Masonic imagery.

At the centre is an image of George II handing an olive branch to Britannia flanked by his son Frederick, Prince of Wales, a leading Freemason and champion of the Patriot Whig cause, and his daughter-in-law the Princess of Wales. The presence of an orange tree is a reference to the William III's victory over Stuart and Bourbon absolutism in the Glorious revolution of 1688. The scene, with its chequered floor, evokes the frontispiece to Anderson's "Constitutions of the Freemasons" and the words attributed to Frederick –"I tread the same steps"- almost certainly reveals the close connection between local Freemasonry and Hanoverian loyalism in Worcester. The "Gentleman's Magazine goes on to describe how, after the firework display, "Martin Sandys, Esq., President of the Constitution Club, attended by about 200 gentlemen, went to the Cathedral, and afterwards most of them dined with him." It goes on to comment (disparagingly?) that the mayor was attended by about twenty-five of the corporation. Even more interestingly (provocatively?) in view of the Stuart and anti-Cromwellian iconography of the Worcester Guildhall (built 1720) is the closing comment "A paper was passed up reflecting on the fireworks and preparations to observe this day of thanksgiving, as if they were to celebrate Oliver Cromwell's birthday" Those familiar with the original porcelain company will also not fail to note that Edward Cave, the London based editor of the Gentleman's Magazine, was also to become one of the original 1751 partners. A further connection is that if Isaac Taylor, the supposed engraver of the 1748 arch, did indeed join Cave at the Magazine he may well have been responsible for the engraving of the 1749 edifice as a sequel to his earlier endeavour.

I would like to probe a little further into the origins of the

iconography of the mug. The Labours of Hercules were favourite topics upon ancient Greek red and black vases (and the wrestling match with Antaeus can be found in numerous examples). In the context of the election dispute of 1747 there is good reason to believe that the choice of the figure of Hercules would have had added meaning. The Jacobites and those Tories sympathetic to the Stuart cause had since 1688 adopted Trojan heroes such as Aeneas to represent their support for a wandering exiled leader. Inevitably, the Greeks tended to be the preferred emblems of the Whigs and Hercules was a particular favourite, one possible reason being that the hero had, according to legend, at one point sacked the city of Troy and replaced Laomedon with Priam when the former failed to reward Hercules for saving the Trojan princess, Hesione. The Third Lord Shaftesbury, grandson of the founder of the Whig Party, had also chosen Hercules to illustrate his views on artistic taste and History painting in his "Characteristics". Later engravers such as Hogarth and Paul de Lamerie had also used Hercules to symbolise the choices the contemporary political establishment faced between Industry and Idleness, Unity and Discord, Prosperity and Poverty and how only through heroic endeavour would justice triumph. William Shenstone's poem "The Judgement of Heracles" (1741) suggests that a specific parallel was made between the hero's victory over Antaeus and that of the Country "Patriots" in bringing about the removal of Walpole from office the following year by "elevating" him to the House of Lords. The poem also linked Heracles to the homes of Patriot Whig grandees Lords Cobham and Lyttleton of Stowe and Hagley Hall respectively, both of whom conveyed a coded political message through apposite classical statuary in their scenic garden walks. The symbolic use of



Figure 7. Rysbrack's Statue of Heracles (Stourhead)

external space was also mirrored by developments in interior design and in an ever-increasing range of material possessions which would come to include porcelain. Henry Hoare at Stourhead commissioned a Rysbrack statue of Heracles for his Pantheon (Fig. 7) and bought a Poussin depiction of "The Choice of Heracles" in 1747, coincidentally the same year as the disputed Worcester election. As Michael Charlesworth has shown<sup>2</sup>, not only does this emphasize the significance of Heracles as a political icon in this period but it also reveals an increasing desire to provide a thematic coherence to the design of the interior and exterior spaces of the homes of the political elite. The observant guest at Stourhead would notice that the choice depicted by the painting was echoed first by the statue outside and then by a fork in a garden path which offered the tourist a choice between an easy walk or a more difficult climb which rewarded those who took it with the best view of the landscaped gardens.

Similarly, the visitor to Hanbury Hall, home of Sir Thomas Vernon, who was the other Whig candidate in the 1747 election, is immediately aware of the way Sir James Thornhill's staircase murals depicting scenes from the life of Achilles was given a contemporary political twist by including a demonised image of the arch - Tory Dr Sachaverell. It is indicative of how the classical world was used to illustrate the political imperatives of the eighteenth century. During the course of

this research, I have also been much struck by the similarity between Thornhill's style of figure painting and that adopted by Wall. It is difficult to believe that in either a medical or a political capacity Wall did not have at least the opportunity to admire at first hand the work of the leading British history painter of the day when it was so close to hand. There is certainly an overlap in the choice of subject matter by the professional artist and the amateur.

Perhaps of even greater relevance for this enquiry, is the so-called Hercules Dressing Room at Hanbury Hall. (Fig. 8) Surmounting one of the fireplaces in an upstairs room is a modern version of an original carving done in a naïve style of a figure of Hercules (stolen in 1961). Perhaps even more appropriately for the purposes of this essay, the fireplace was of the type commonly used for displays of porcelain. The figure is so curious that it is difficult to believe that Hercules did not have some particular association with the Vernon family and therefore with the Worcestershire Whig interest. Whilst the figure of Hercules was a ubiquitous image, there is also good reason to believe that his victory depicted on the Tracy mug would have been seen by contemporaries in Worcester as a specifically "Patriot" Whig icon associated with opposition to Walpole as well as the Tories.

Although its Whig associations do not appear to have any straightforward documentary corroboration in the way that the Hercules motif does, the story of Androcles and the Lion on the Tracy mug may have specific political and cultural significance, even if it is somewhat speculative. Firstly, although I have yet to find substantiation, the scene of Androcles removing the thorn from the lion's paw may well have been used to depict the removal of Walpole as Heracles and Antaeus was. Secondly, it is important to remember that the in the context

Figure 8. The Hanbury Heracles

of 1747/48 the Tracy victory was not just seen as a triumph over electoral malpractice. Any impartial reading of the events of the election make it perfectly clear that both parties engaged in dirty tricks. The crucial issue for the Tracy party was rather that it had been a victory over Tories suspected of Jacobite tendencies and that the Church of England had once again been saved as it had been in 1745 from the tyranny of Rome. In the Androcles story, both hero and lion are, in a sense, victims of Rome's barbarism which seeks to pit the two in adversarial contest in the amphitheatre. However, as with the Hercules, Androcles emerges victorious because his nobler qualities shine through. His earlier courage and kindness towards the injured lion (Androcles is seen removing the throne from the lion's paw in the background of the Tracy mug) proves his salvation. When pitted in the amphitheatre together, the lion (a figure which, of course, was long associated with English nationhood) demonstrates its gratitude by not devouring Androcles and thereby thwarting Rome of its desire to see animal cruelty triumph over human reason and compassion. This could well be coded language for the victory of "rational Protestantism" over barbaric Catholicism.

With all propaganda there is always a reason behind the choice of all visual messages and Worcester would lead the way in the mid eighteenth century with its successful transfer printed commemorative ware, depicting heroes of the national Protestant cause such as Pitt, Frederick the Great, the Marquis of Granby etc who had defied the French/Catholic/Jacobite cause. The wrestling scene would also have had a particular resonance in the mid 18th century with its increasingly confident emphasis upon the power of human reason and ability to develop beyond the constraints of nature in both a spiritual and a material sense. Hercules was



a son of a god and possessed of god-like powers. He was able to defeat Antaeus by lifting him off the ground and depriving him of the strength of his earth mother. The struggle, in other words, is a metaphor and an inspiration for man's ability to make use of his own divine powers derived from his Creator to master the base clay from which, according to Genesis, he was made. In an age transformed by an agricultural revolution, large scale mining, the cutting of a nationwide network of canals and, at the precise moment of the Tracy election, the discovery of making soft-paste porcelain, it was easy for men to believe that they were indeed subduing the earth. For 18th century Englishmen -and Whigs in particular- it was a belief about to be reinforced by the defeat of the Jacobites at home and European and indigenous rulers abroad in the quest for empire and new markets. The admirer was intended to see Tracy's victory not just as the triumph of a Whig over a Tory but the salvation of a city, acting as a metaphor of the nation as a whole.

#### Notes

- 1 EPC Transactions vol iii, 1931, pp.84-85
- 2 New Arcadian Journal no.37/38, pp.65-80 "Hercules, Apollo and the Hermit; Exploring Stourhead"