

# 11. Olaudah Equiano

## Olaudah Equiano

### *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (1789)

#### Diary 39

The passage below is adapted from the diary pages of Olaudah Equiano (1759-1797), a black man from Africa who was emancipated after being a slave in the West Indies. He supported the abolitionist ideals yet it was not until 1833 that Parliament officially abolished slavery.

- The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave-ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These
- 5 filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror, which I am yet at a loss to describe, nor the then feelings of my mind.
- When I was carried on board I was
- 10 immediately handled, and tossed up,<sup>1</sup> to see if I were sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I was got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions
- 15 too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, which was very different from any I had ever heard, united to confirm me in this belief. ... quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted.
- 20 When I recovered a little, I found some black people about me, who I believed were some of those who brought me on board, and had been receiving their pay; they talked to me in order to cheer me, but all in vain. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair? They told me I was not.



Allan Ramsay, Portrait of an African (1757-1760).

1. **handled, and tossed up:** it. *palpato e sballottato qua e là*

One day they had taken a number of fishes and when they had killed and satisfied  
25 themselves with as many as they thought fit, to our astonishment who were on the deck,  
rather than give any of them to us to eat as we expected, they tossed the remaining fish into  
the sea again, although we begged and prayed for some as well as we could, but in vain; and  
some of my countrymen, being pressed by hunger, took an opportunity, when they thought  
no one saw them, of trying to get a little privately; but they were discovered, and the attempt  
30 procured them some very severe floggings<sup>2</sup>.  
Many a time we were near suffocation from the want of fresh air, which we were often  
without for whole days together. This, and the stench of the necessary tubs<sup>3</sup>, carried off<sup>4</sup>  
many. During our passage I first saw flying fishes, which surprised me very much: they used  
frequently to fly across the ship, and many of them fell on the deck. At last we came in sight  
35 of the island of Barbadoes, at which the whites on board gave a great shout, and made many  
signs of joy to us. We did not know what to think of this; but as the vessel drew nearer we  
plainly saw the harbour, and other ships of different kinds and sizes; and we soon anchored  
amongst them off Bridge Town. Many merchants and planters now came on board, though it  
was in the evening. They put us in separate parcels, and examined us attentively. They also  
40 made us jump, and pointed to the land, signifying we were to go there. We thought by this  
we should be eaten by those ugly men, as they appeared to us; and, when soon after we were  
all put down under the deck again, there was much dread and trembling among us, and  
nothing but bitter cries to be heard all the night from these apprehensions, insomuch that<sup>5</sup> at  
45 last the white people got some old slaves from the land to pacify us. They told us we were not  
to be eaten, but to work, and were soon to go on land, where we should see many of our  
country people.

2. **floggings**: corporal punishments, whippings

3. **stench of the necessary tubs**: it. *puzza delle tinozze necessarie (ai bisogni corporali)*

4. **carried off**: caused the death

5. **insomuch that**: it. *a tal punto che*